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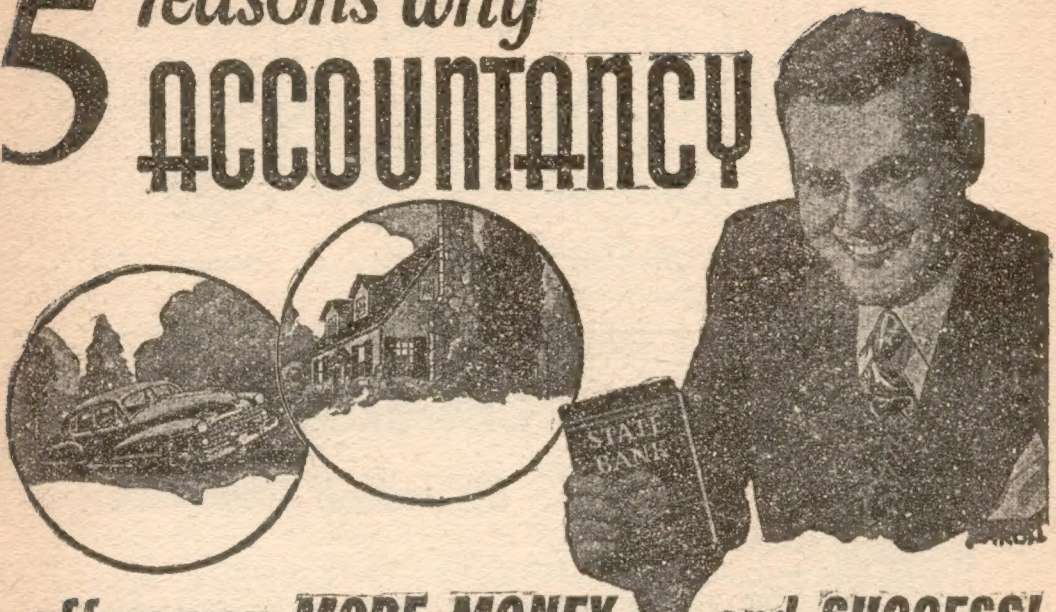

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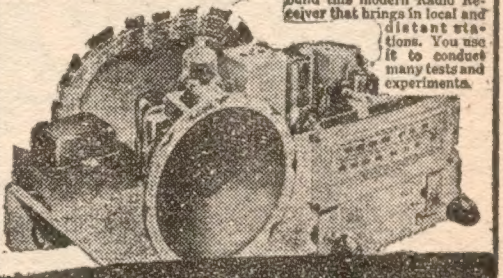

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GREETINGS, waddies, here we go on another trail ride with the customary trail talk. Turn your cayuses westward and we will ride over some of the old trails of yesteryear, trails that were hardly trails at that time, trails that held romance and danger but have been supplanted by wide paved highways where we skim along in comfort today.

Of course, there is still romance along the way, as romance never dies, and there is danger too, but of a far different kind than the danger that existed along our early day Western trails. The danger of today is caused by the fact that there are so many of us traveling the same roads or trails, and we travel at tremendous speed.

During this past year we celebrated the centennial of the gold rush to California, the great rush westward that was the one big factor in the start of reclaiming or winning to civilization the vast wilderness between the Mississippi and California or the Pacific coast, and those trails westward through that wilderness held plenty of danger. There were many tragedies, countless hardships and privations, and many of those who traveled westward in search of wealth passed it by on the way and did not know it.

Caravans of Yesteryear

In Storey County, Nevada, a few miles southeast of Reno, Nevada, a barren mountain lifts its head amid a weary monotony of desert hills. That is, it did back in 1849. The mountain is still there, and so are the hills, but it is not quite as much of a desert as it was at that time, and not so monotonous. But in the days of '49, through the valley at the mountain's foot, might come a few rough-clad men, passing wearily, or a dusty caravan of covered wagons, groaning slowly, slowly westward. They might stop beside a feeble river, and might slaughter a footsore ox for food, as many times in reaching that far westward from the starting point provisions might be running exceedingly low. They might even bury some victim of the long trip, one who had become ill, one whose strength and stamina had been insufficient to weather the long journey, one whose hope for great riches in shining gold had died with him.

They might rest a day, but would then journey on. They were a brave lot and would not turn back, yet many of them who went to California during the gold rush did return to this same spot, and none of them knew as they passed on the long weary trip to California in search of gold that they were passing what was later to prove the richest mining section of America, the site later of the great Comstock Lode, Virginia City, that was to gain fame all over the world.

The mountain at that time was called Sun Peak. Later it was called Mount Davidson. Travelers gave it little attention, for they had surmounted much greater peaks back in the Great Rockies, and thus it was practically ignored as they looked forward to the high Sierras near the end of their journey.

On they went to California, some to make fortunes, "strike it rich" in the goldfields, others to fail or find and pan just enough gold to keep them alive, some to work and sweat for years, always hoping that they

(Continued on page 8)

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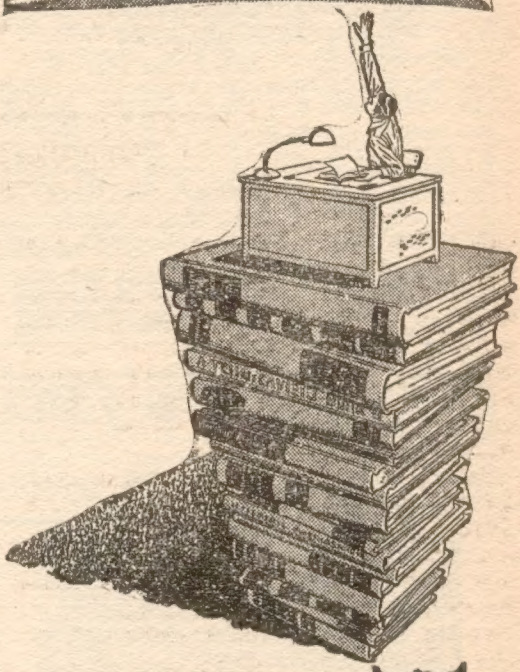

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

would wrest a fortune in gold from the hills but thousands failing to do so.

Most of the gold seekers were ignorant of mining. They knew nothing about the business, except placer mining, with pick, shovel, rocker and pan, and learned this only by watching others.

The Broken Bottle

While the California gold rush was still on a Mormon emigrant train, camping in Carson Valley to rest and recuperate their animals, devoted a little time to prospecting. They discovered a little gold at the mouth of what later became known as Gold Canyon. Knowing nothing of geology, they did not understand the significance of the deposit there. They abandoned the search shortly for what they believed to be greater opportunity beyond the Sierras. They failed to appreciate that the gold in the canyon indicated a source of far greater riches higher up the slopes.

Later other gold seekers in Carson Valley found gold in scant quantities and with it a metal that they believed to be lead and threw away. One of these was James Finney, who was called "Virginia" from the fact that he was always boasting about being from Virginia, and the town was named Virginia City after him, or rather by him as he so named it once when he was carrying a heavy load of liquor on the inside, and a bottle of the same brand in his hand. He fell and broke the bottle and was of the opinion that having broken the bottle he should christen something. Another was Henry Thomas Paige Comstock, a lanky, loud-voiced, boastful, bullying prospector, he was known familiarly as "Old Pancake" from the fact that pancakes were his chief diet.

Contrary to the belief of many, Comstock was not the discover of the lode. Pete O'Riley and Patrick McLaughlin were in fact the real discoverers of the Comstock Lode. Comstock just happened along and claimed to have previously bought the land and declared himself in on the claim.

A New Strike

They were still mining for gold, and most of them finding enough to make a day's wage

(Continued on page 89)

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OUR COMMITTEE IS GIVING A LITTLE PARTY FOR SANDY LATER. WILL YOU JOIN US?
THIS IS MY FIRST GOOD LOOK AT YOU, MISTER. . . . YOU'RE HANDSOME!
WE-L-L. . . .
PLEASE DO!

TO GET REFRESHING, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING, TRY THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE KEENER AND LONGER-LASTING THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES. WHAT'S MORE, THEY FIT YOUR GILLITTE RAZOR PRECISELY AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY TEN-BLADE PACK
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
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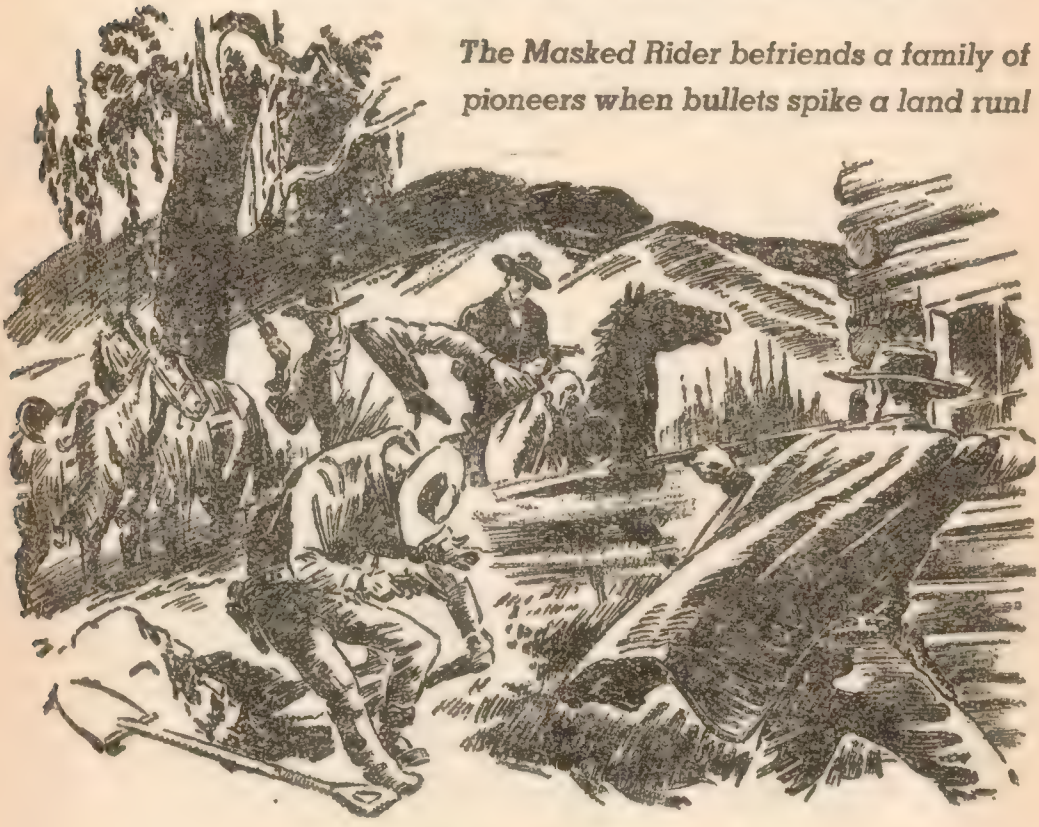
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

GUNS across the CHEROKEE STRIP

The Masked Rider befriends a family of pioneers when bullets spike a land run!



A Novel by JOSEPH CHADWICK

CHAPTER I

Legend on the Loose

THE Indians were gone, and the cattlemen, and now, by Presidential proclamation, the Cherokee Strip, a land larger than the State of Massachusetts, was to be thrown open to homesteaders. The lure of free land was as attractive as that of a gold strike, and all manner of men gathered at the starting lines, the boundaries of the Strip, to await the signal, a volley of shots from cavalry carbines, that would start the Run—at noon of September 16th, 1893.

North of Hennessey, in Old Oklahoma fifteen thousand men, women and chil-

dren were gathered. Soldiers patrolled the line, holding the vast crowd in check, rounding up sooners—those men who registered and then, in an attempt to jump the gun, sneaked into the cleared Strip to hide in some brush-grown draw or dense stand of blackjacks. Only land office and post office staffs, occupying plank buildings on sites of proposed county seats, were permitted inside the Strip, and the soldiers—hard-riding cavalrymen—were rough on the despised sooners.

"With a horse like that, I'd sure grab me the claim I hanker for."

The speaker was a lithe-bodied, bronze-skinned young man in range clothes. His name was Dick Larue, and he was a cowboy from the Chickasaw Nation. He spoke not with hope, for he knew the sorrel's owner intended to ride the fine animal in the Run, but with honest envy. His own mount, staked out near the sorrel, was a tough little pinto cowpony. It couldn't compare with the other animal, a thoroughbred Virginia hunter.

"Nobody rides Red Prince but me," said the other man by the fire.

He was twice Dick Larue's age, a lanky man with a neatly trimmed beard well dusted with gray. He wore rough clothes and shabby boots, like most of the boomers, but he possessed a genteel manner that suggested better days. Henry Randall was from Virginia, and he had once been comfortably well-to-do. Having fallen upon hard times, he had decided to pull up roots and head West to start anew, and his westward trek had brought him here to the Strip. Out of bankruptcy, Randall had salvaged the sorrel, Red Prince, which was, outside of his family, his most cherished possession.

Henry Randall lighted his pipe, glanced over toward his big canvas-sheeted wagon. His wife, Martha, was giving the ears of his seven-year-old son, Danny, their nightly scrubbing. The boy had an amazing capacity for getting dirty, an equally amazing capacity for squealing when he was washed clean. Tess was busy washing the supper dishes.... Tess was eighteen, blonde and pretty, and Henry Randall knew that though the sight of Red Prince attracted Dick Larue to the camp, it was the warmth and gaiety and prettiness of Tess that had caused the cowboy to linger. Remembering his and Martha's courting days, Henry Randall smiled as he puffed at his pipe.

His smile faded when he looked back at Red Prince.

THE sorrel was a beautiful animal. Its coat gleamed richly in the firelight. It was a clean-limbed horse that made Dick Larue's pinto look runty. Randall had his wagon horses on a picket-line some distance from the camp, but he kept Red Prince close to where he ate and slept. More men than Dick Larue had eyed the sorrel covetously.

Randall began to frown.

He was thinking of that shrewd-eyed man who had come to the camp on three different occasions with his offer to buy Red Prince. The man had said, that afternoon, "Five hundred dollars, Randall. That's a lot of money. You'd better take it. It's my last offer." He had given Henry Randall a meaningful look, and said again, "You'd better take it."

A threat?

It had seemed so, and now, as darkness closed in, Henry Randall felt uneasy. He wondered if he had been wise in camping in a lonely spot, beyond sight of the other land boomers. It would be easy for that shrewd-eyed man, who'd said his name was Vance Russell, to come with some friends and take Red Prince by force.

Randall rose and went to his wagon. When he returned to the fire, he was carrying a rifle.

Dick Larue looked up from rolling a cigarette, surprise showing on his youthful face. "What's the idea, Henry?" he demanded.

"Figured I'd clean this shooting-iron to keep my hands busy."

"You mean," said Dick, "you're afraid that smooth-talking dude will come back. You think he wants Red Prince bad enough to steal him."

"I'm hoping I'm wrong, Dick."

"Yeah. So am I," said the cowpuncher, suddenly worried. He peered about. The Randall camp was in a glade-like hollow, with trees and brush all about, and it was

already dark there though a last trace of the sunset was still splashed across the portion of the western sky seen through the foliage.

Dick Larue wasn't a timid man, yet he too felt uneasy. He had mingled with the crowd ranged along the starting line, and, though most of the boomers appeared to be a decent sort, he had recognized many men of dubious reputation. He lighted his cigarette with a bit of burning brush plucked from the fire. "Tomorrow, we'd better find a campsite that's not so lonesome."

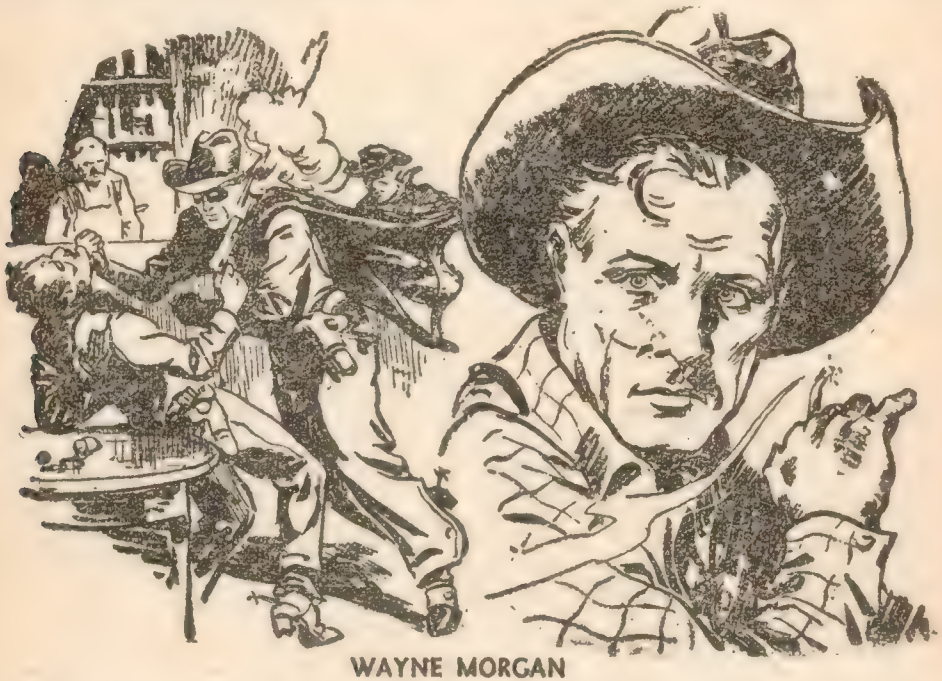
"I'd leave here now if it wasn't so late," Randall said. "Do you know this Vance Russell, Dick?"

"Never saw him before in my life."

"He may be honest. But something about him gives me the creeps."

"It's his eyes," Dick Larue said. "They're downright mean, even when he shows a smile." He was watching Tess, now, as though hoping she would come to the fire and talk a little with him. The girl had finished with the dishes; she was now in the act of spreading out young Danny's bedroll.

"Plenty of tough customers around," Dick went on, talking around his cigarette. "When I went to the registry booth yesterday, I overheard two hombres talking to an Army officer. One of 'em was a deputy U. S. marshal. The other looked like a big-town lawman. The deputy marshal was saying that he had a tip that the Masked Rider was in these parts."



WAYNE MORGAN

RANDALL looked puzzled. "The Masked Rider?" he said. Then, before Dick Larue could answer, young Danny, scrubbed until he glowed and in his nightshirt, came to say goodnight. Then Tess came after the boy went to bed. She sat by the fire and her fingers were busy with yarn and needles. Tess was knitting a pair of woolen mittens. She hadn't said so, but Dick Larue knew they were for him.

Mrs. Randall joined them a little later, and there was no more talk of hardcases and masked riders.

Dick Larue bedded down a little distance away from the Randall camp, as he had the past two nights. He lay in his blankets, and just by raising himself on his elbow, he could see the glow of the dying campfire. He could see Henry Randall still sitting by the fire, his rifle across his knees, his head falling for-

ward now and then as sleep fought with him. The rest of the family was already asleep an hour or more. It was the first night Randall had remained on watch.

It was the first night that Dick Larue had remained wakeful. He hoped that there would be no trouble. He was as fond of Tess' parents and brother as he was of Tess herself, and he didn't want anything to happen to any of them.

The cowboy from the Chickasaw Nation blamed himself, afterwards.

He dozed off.

A crashing gunshot woke him, jarred him wide awake. He flung aside his blanket, jumped to his feet, six-gun in hand. Another shot came, this one the roar of a .45 while the first had been the crack of a rifle. Henry Randall's rifle, without a doubt.

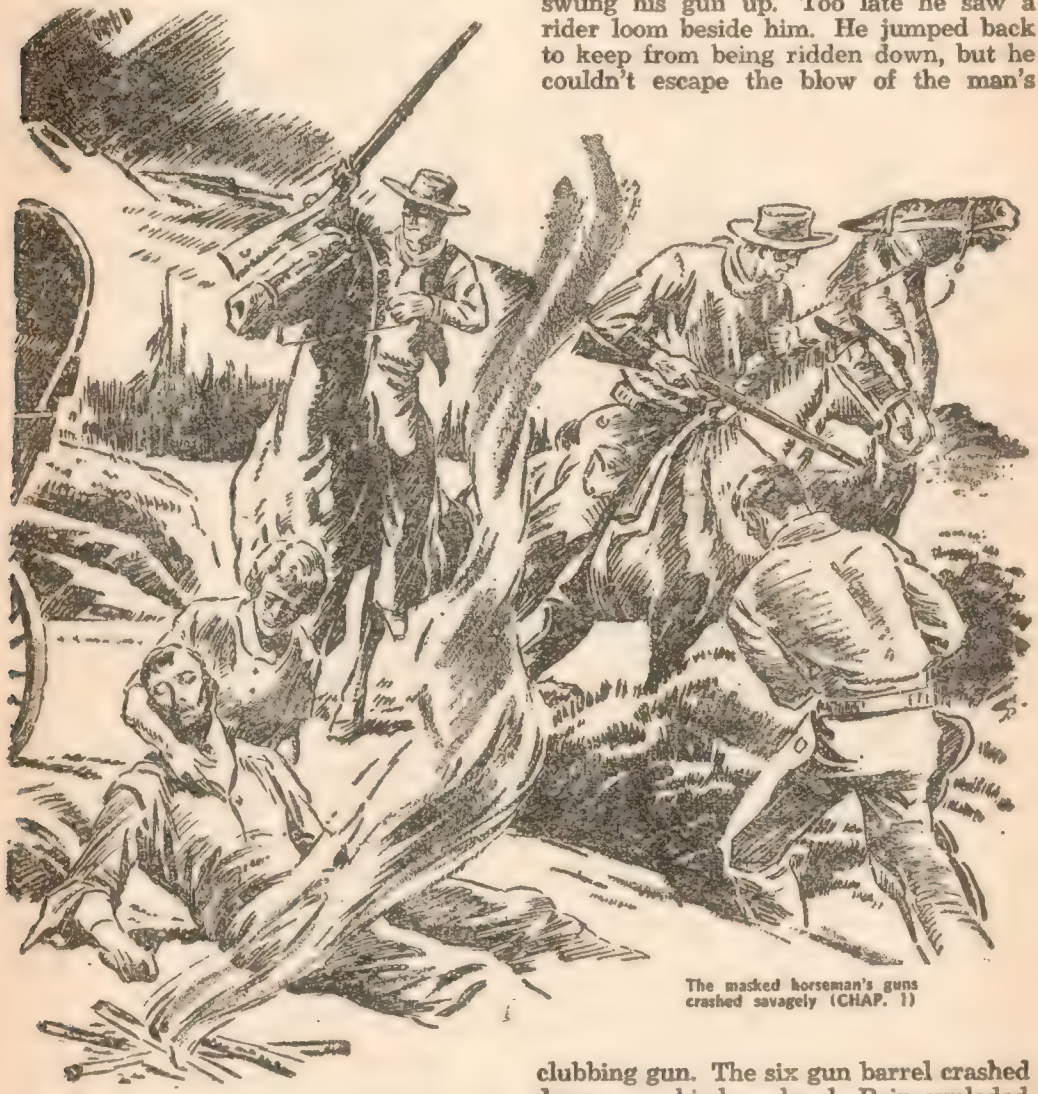
Dick Larue ran toward the camp, crash-

ing through a tangle of brush. The fire was now but a bed of red-glowing embers. The shadowy figure of a horseman passed before the ruddy patch, was vaguely silhouetted, and Dick saw that the rider wore a mask. A scream rang out; it was Mrs. Randall crying her husband's name. Other riders milled about the camp. A horse snorted in fright, then shrieked in animal fury.

Red Prince!

Three of the night riders were trying to make off with the sorrel. One had dabbed Red's picket rope about his saddlehorn, and was dragging at the rearing, kicking stallion. The other two were quirting the horse across the rump, cursing and yelling.

DICK LARUE broke from the brush, an angry yell escaping him. He swung his gun up. Too late he saw a rider loom beside him. He jumped back to keep from being ridden down, but he couldn't escape the blow of the man's clubbing gun. The six gun barrel crashed down upon his bare head. Pain exploded inside his skull. His knees buckled, and he was thrown to the ground. But he clung to his gun and, though dazed and full of pain, squeezed out a shot as he rolled over and came to his knees.



The masked horseman's guns crashed savagely (CHAP. 1)

His shot missed, and now two masked riders rode at him.

Then Dick Larue, facing certain death because he was too dazed to shoot accurately, saw what must be a vision. The moon was just above the rim of the hollow, huge and blood-red, and limned against it was the figure of a horseman in a domino mask and a flowing black cape.

The horseman's guns crashed savagely, and the nearest of the two horse thieves was knocked from his saddle just before he was able to fire a fatal shot into the kneeling, helpless Dick Larue. The next moment the second of the pair screamed in agony, dropped his gun, grabbed at his arm. His galloping mount carried him harmlessly past Dick, off through the brush.

Dick Larue felt like rubbing his eyes before peering again toward the crest of the slope. He doubted their accuracy. He saw the horseman who had saved his life swing his coal-black mount about and gallop away from the moon that silhouetted him, his cape billowing out behind him. The rider was going after the three thieves who had by now got Red Prince out of the hollow and into the screening timber. Guns racketed yonder in the darkness.

In the sudden quiet there in the hollow, Mrs. Randall sobbed as she knelt by the prone figure of her husband. Young Danny whimpered. Tess Randall cried, "Dick —Oh, Dick!' and ran to him. Dick Larue managed to get to his feet. He held his aching head in his hands. Tess supported him, and asked over and over if he was badly hurt.

"Your dad?" he asked, after reassuring her about himself.

"He's shot in the leg, Dick. Oh, it was horrible!"

"It's my fault. I fell asleep," Dick Larue muttered. "I let them get away with Red!" He lowered his hands, stared at Tess' frightened face. "That rider who fired on them—who saved me. Did you see him?" He was still doubting his own senses, and needed Tess to tell him that they hadn't played tricks upon him. Like cowhands everywhere, Dick had heard of a mysterious rider who risked his life to help people in distress or danger. But he'd always considered that rider just a legend, a part of folklore. He said, as Tess' nod affirmed what he had seen, "It—it was the Masked Rider!"

CHAPTER II

Death of a Horse Thief

THE trail of the night riders who had raided the camp in the hollow, a raid onto which the Masked Rider had stumbled by accident, led deeper into the low hills. There had been five of them. One had died under the Masked Rider's crashing Colts, another had fled after being wounded. The other three had escaped with a stolen horse, and were now fleeing through the darkness at a hard lope.

The Masked Rider had only an occasional glimpse of them, and they managed to keep out of bullet range. Despite the speed of the Masked Rider's mount, the great-hearted Midnight, the distance between quarry and pursuer did not diminish. The masked horse thieves evidently knew the country, which was to their advantage in the wild chase, while the Masked Rider was somewhat hampered by the unfamiliar terrain. But he was sure that in the end, his big coal-black stallion would run the other horses to the ground.

The Masked Rider had not the slightest idea what sort of ugly game was being played with such viciousness. He had come up from Texas to the Cherokee Strip on a mission, and, so far as he knew, neither the people in the camp nor the men who had raided it were concerned with that mission. But one thing had been clear to the mystery rider who had become famous as the Robin Hood of the West—combating evil, lending aid to those in distress—that the people in the camp were the victims of wrongdoing.

He had good reasons for having jumped to that spur-of-the moment conclusion. Men of evil nature seldom, if ever, travel with their womenfolk and children—as did the two men in the camp. And men who ride at night with masks hiding their faces to attack a camp in which there are women and children are never honest men. In all his years of dealing out his

personal brand of justice, the Masked Rider had never encountered anyone other than himself who wore a mask except for evil.

He had another glimpse of his quarry, topping a low ridge to the west. They were still towing the stolen horse, and traveling fast. But he'd gained upon them. The Masked Rider swung his gun up, fired two quick shots. One of the trio swung his horse about, reined in, opened up with a rifle, then, after half a dozen wild shots, disappeared over the ridge after his partners.

THE Masked Rider pressed on, and Midnight carried him up the slope of the ridge. He was puzzled. He could not understand why a bunch of men would kill and risk being killed to steal a solitary horse. The Masked Rider was halfway up the slope when the rifleman started shooting again. The Masked Rider grunted with startled surprise.

A slug tore through his cape, another nicked his cone-peaked black Stetson, a third shrieked so close to Midnight's head that the stallion snorted in fright. The powder-flashes came from a bunch of rocks atop the ridge. The rifleman had outwitted the Masked Rider. He'd ridden from sight, dismounted, returned to the crest of the ridge afoot—and was now forted up.

Another shot came.

The slug whined past the Masked Rider's ear.

There was no retreat, for if the Robin Hood outlaw turned back down the slope, he'd surely be targeted. To stand in the open, or to keep climbing, would make him an even easier mark. The blue eyes peering through the slits of the domino mask found an outcropping of rocks twenty feet away. The Masked Rider holstered his sixgun, grabbed the Winchester from its saddle scabbard, and leapt from his horse. He was not a second too soon, for the hidden rifleman fired two more shots. Only the Masked Rider's sudden move had thrown off the ambusher's aim.

Plunging across the uneven ground, the tall man in black gained the rocks. They jutted only a few inches above the ground, and he had to flatten himself behind them to have any cover at all. He levered a cartridge into the carbine's firing chamber, and sighted down its barrel with eyes as chill as ice. He fired at the ambusher's powder flashes.

It was a duel now, a duel to the death.

The men who around campfires or in barrooms spun tales of the Masked Rider's deeds—more often than not with great exaggeration—claimed that he possessed nerves of iron and had been born without a capacity for fear. That was not true. The Masked Rider had known fear time and time again, and it gripped him now—and for him as for any man it had a clammy touch.

In a gunfight, the man on higher ground always had the advantage. Even in target-shooting for sport, it was difficult to shoot up a slope. In this case, the Masked Rider had cover less adequate than that of his adversary. Too, he had to consider that the ambusher's companions might circle around and take him from the rear. But, as the duel continued with crashing shots, the Masked Rider's fear was not entirely a personal thing.

IF HE died there on that slope, a man down in Texas, in a cowtown called Valido, would also die—on the gallows. A young fellow with a wife and a baby, a young fellow named Ben Niles who was wrongly charged with murder. It was the Masked Rider's mission north to find the real murderer, so that Ben Niles would be saved from the noose, and now that mission was in jeopardy. And in that knowledge lay the Masked Rider's real fear.

The anger replaced his fear.

The ambusher had stopped shooting for a moment, perhaps to reload, and now, opening up again, he chose a different target. The man was shooting at Midnight. Tiring of the duel, he meant to kill the big black stallion so that the Masked Rider could not follow him. The valiant Midnight heard the slugs probing for him. Rearing high, kicking out, the stallion fought against the unseen hornetlike foe. Maddened, Midnight trumpeted like a wild mustang.

The Masked Rider bore a great hatred for men who wantonly killed horses and it swept through him now. He ignored his own danger. Leaping up, he began to climb the slope. His 30-30 slammed slugs

in among the rocks above, and suddenly an agonized cry rang out. The ambush gun fell silent.

A moment later, the tall black-caped figure charged in among the boulders. He found a man sprawled on his back, shot through the chest. Strangling sounds came from the ambusher, and it was clear that he was dying. His eyes, above a neckerchief mask, were already dull. His hatred gone, the Masked Rider knelt by the man. He removed the neckerchief mask and looked upon a face marked by long years of viciousness. Dying though the horse thief was, he drew his lips back in a snarl and spat an obscene name at the Masked Rider.

THE man in the domino mask was always compassionate. He said, not unkindly, "Take it easy, friend. You're a goner." He saw terror crawl into the man's eyes. "What were you up to, anyway?"

The man's voice was weak, and had an empty sound. "We were after that—that sorrel horse," he said, gasping. "Me and my partners were offered five hundred dollars for the animal. We—"

He was sinking rapidly.

"Who offered you the five hundred dollars?" the Masked Rider asked.

"A dudish hombre. I didn't—didn't know him."

"Why'd he want the sorrel so badly?"

It was a long moment before the dying man said, in a whisper now:

"Claimed he needed the fastest horse he could get hold of. To make a ride into the Strip."

"A sooner, eh?".

"No. It was something else—"

"What else? What, man?"

The Masked Rider got no answer. With a sigh, the horse thief died—almost peacefully. For a lengthy moment, the black-clad man knelt there. His eyes, seen through the slits in the domino mask, were thoughtful. The man he sought, the murderer for whose crime young Ben Niles was to hang, had reason to enter the Cherokee Strip—not to file on a homestead but to locate a cache of loot from a two-year-old bank robbery. It occurred to the Masked Rider that he had stumbled upon the trail he sought! The trail of a vicious but clever badman named Russ Vardin!

CHAPTER III

More Than a Horse

LEAVING the dead man for his outlaw-friends to recover and bury, the Masked Rider turned away. He went down the slope, caught up Midnight's reins. He stroked the stallion's sleek neck, talked softly to comfort the spooked animal. Then he swung to the saddle and turned back the way he had come. There was no use in attempting a search for the two riders who had escaped with the stolen sorrel. They were miles away by now, and there would be no tracking them in the darkness.

The Masked Rider debated whether he should return to his own hidden camp, where his partner, the Yaqui Indian, Blue Hawk, waited, or if he should visit the camp from which the sorrel had been stolen. He decided upon the second course. There was a hope that the people there could give him some information about the dudish hombre who wanted a fast horse so badly for a trip into the forbidden Cherokee Strip.

It was half a dozen miles back to the camp in the hollow, and as the Masked Rider approached, a wary voice yelled a challenge. "Name yourself, mister! I've got you covered!"

The Masked Rider lifted his empty right hand.

"My name is my own secret, friend," he called out. "But men call me the Masked Rider."

He rode slowly down to the camp, after hearing the hidden man's startled exclamation, and the fellow, a cowpuncher, by the looks of him, stepped from behind a blackjack pine with a cocked six-gun in his hand. Beyond, the campfire had been built up. In its glow, the Masked Rider saw two women and a small boy. A bearded man lay wrapped in blankets close to the fire. Across the little clearing lay another figure, it was completely blanket-shrouded, and the Masked Rider knew that it was the body of the horse thief he had killed there.

He said, "I'm here as your friend."

He smiled, showing beneath the domino mask gleaming teeth. It was the smile of

The hammerheaded cowpony reared high, forefeet kicking savagely (CHAP. VIII)

a handsome man. "I'm sorry, but I didn't get back your horse. I ran into an ambush, and before I'd killed the bushwhacker the others had high-tailed it. It must be a fine animal to cause so much trouble."

"It's one of the finest cayuses I ever laid eyes on," the cowboy said. "That goes for the one you're riding, too. That's some animal, friend. My name's Dick Larue. I'm thanking you for saving my life. I've heard of you often, but—well, I guess I never believed that you were real."

Deep, musical laughter came from the black-clad horseman. Then he said, "I still haven't given up the sorrel for lost. I'll get it back for you folks, if it's possible. Those thieves were offered five hundred dollars to steal the horse. I came back here, hoping you could give me some information about the man who made the offer." He glanced at the man lying by the fire. "Your friend is badly hurt?"

"Bad enough. He's got a bullet hole through his leg," Dick said, a rough edge of anger in his voice. "Henry Randall owns Red Prince—that sorrel stallion—and he had a hunch somebody might try to steal him. Henry kept watch, and he fired a warning shot when those masked riders showed up. One of 'em gunned him down."

THE Masked Rider dismounted, crossed to the injured man. He removed his black sombrero, bowed to the girl and the older woman. He flashed a grin at the boy who gazed at him in awe, his eyes round as half dollars. He knelt by Henry Randall.

"Want me to look at your wound, sir? I've had some experience—"

"No need, stranger. My wife and Dick cauterized it and bandaged it," the bearded man said. "It'll be all right—in time." His voice too turned angry. "But it'll keep me from taking part in the Run. I was counting on riding Red, and beating out the crowd. First comers will grab off the best claims. The slow-pokes'll take what's left, and I hear that a lot of the Strip isn't good farmland."

"I'll stake out a claim for you, Henry," Dick Larue broke in. "A good one, I know the Strip. I'll grab one with water and trees."

"I won't hear to that," Randall said thickly, with spirit. "You want a claim of your own, son." He looked back at the Masked Rider. "Dick aims to beat out the crowd, too. And file on a county seat claim. He figures on cashing in big on such a claim."

The Masked Rider nodded.

What could be seen of his masked face was thoughtful. He looked down at the ailing man, saw his great disappointment. He said, "You could join in the Run with your wagon—"

"Too slow," Randall interrupted.

"And follow somebody who'd stake a claim for you."

"Now who'd that be? Everybody and his brother is out to stake his own claim."

The black-clad rider smiled, and said, "I ran into a drifter the other day, a young fellow named Wayne Morgan. I figure he'd get in the Run, stake a claim, hold it against claim-jumpers until you filed the location, for a couple of dollars."

Randall looked hopeful. "You ask him, will you, friend?" Almost at once, his face fell. "Without Red Prince to ride, he wouldn't have much chance—unless he's got a good mount."

"He was riding a roan cowpony."

"Well, I think I can manage to pay him a few dollars."

The Masked Rider nodded. The smile still played across his lips. It often amused him to talk of Wayne Morgan, his real self, as another man. He said, "But maybe I can still get Red Prince back for you. The Run is still two days off. Those thieves were offered five hundred dollars for the sorrel. If I can find the man who made the offer—"

DESPITE pain and weakness, Henry Randall levered himself up on his elbows. His eyes blazed. "He's a big man, dresses in fancy clothes, claims his name is Vance Russell. About forty years old, black hair with a little gray at the temples. I'd have taken him for a banker or a big merchant, except for his eyes. Never saw such shrewd eyes, or ugly ones. He could sure look mean when I refused to sell him Red. First time I saw him was three days ago, when I was at one of the booths registering for the Run. Saw him the next day, when we were heading for a campsite away from the crowd. This afternoon, he showed up again."

The Masked Rider nodded, his smile gone.

He had only a flimsy description of the man he sought, Russ Vardin, but this Vance Russell fit it generally. True, many men answered such a description. But the Masked Rider was hopeful that if he located the man who received the stolen sorrel, he would have found the man who murdered an Amberton Detective Agency operative down in Valido, Texas.

Rising, the Masked Rider told the wounded man to take it easy. "I'll send Wayne Morgan around here tomorrow, and I'll try to get Red Prince back."

He started to turn away, but Mrs. Randall, a slim and still attractive woman in her early forties, grasped one of his hands in both her own. "We'll be so grateful if you can help us," she told him. "Red Prince is more than just a horse to my husband."

"I understand," the Masked Rider said, glancing at his own mount. He knew that a horse could be a comrade to a man. "Make your husband rest, Mrs. Randall."

He strode to Midnight, caught up the reins. The tow-headed youngster, wearing only shoes and nightshirt, was gazing at the black in a wide-eyed way. "He's almost as good a horse as Red," the boy said. "Almost."

Midnight's owner chuckled. Dick Larue came and grasped his right hand. The girl hurried over, and, before the Masked Rider could guess her intention, she put her hands on his shoulders, lifted herself on tiptoe, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "That," she said, "is for saving Dick's life."

"Aw, mush!" said young Danny. "Kissin'!"

The Masked Rider laughed again, swung to Midnight's saddle.

Turning away, he lifted his right arm in a gay salute. The big black started out at an easy lope, climbed from the hollow, and vanished with his rider through the timber.

The Masked Rider headed for his own camp, one even more isolated than the one he had just left. He was in a hopeful mood. He now was sure that the man he sought, Russ Vardin, was somewhere nearby. He had noted the similarity of the two names—Russ Vardin and Vance Russell. His experience told him that most men when changing their names, chose one similar to the one being discarded. Russ Vardin must have made that same mistake.

The Masked Rider was hopeful but not too much so.

He not only had to find Russ Vardin in time to save Ben Niles from the gallows, but also in time to keep him from murdering another of those Amberton detectives.

CHAPTER IV

Blue Hawk Reports

OF THE Amberton Detective Agency operatives, two had come to Valido, Texas because of a letter Ben Niles had written to the Drovers' Bank at Harmon, Kansas. The Masked Rider, or rather, Wayne Morgan, had learned about the affair from Ben Niles's grief-stricken wife.

Like an ordinary drifter, Wayne Morgan had stopped at a little ranch one day and offered to do some chores for a handout meal. There had been no man at the ranch, only an attractive but sad-eyed young woman and a six-month-old baby. After Morgan had cut some kindling and done a few other chores, the woman—Mrs. Niles—called him into the kitchen. She'd given him an appetizing meal, and Morgan, sensing that something was wrong, drew the woman out, not because of idle curiosity, but on the chance that he could help her in some way.

She'd needed somebody to talk to, to confide in, and she'd told him how her husband, whom she'd married but a year and a half ago, had been arrested for murder.

Ben Niles was young, in his early twenties, and two years earlier, going to Kansas with a trail-herd, he'd got in with bad company, and made the one misstep of his life. Niles had ridden with the Maugher wild bunch to Harmon, where they held up the bank. He'd held the horses while the other members of the band performed the actual robbery, and he had been one of two members who escaped when a law posse took up the trail.

The two had fled south, with the lawmen after them. Niles's companion, Russ Vardin, had been wounded, and he had grown weaker day by day. Vardin had been carrying the loot in his saddlebags. Finally the outlaw had tumbled from his horse—dead, the panicky Ben Niles had believed.

Niles had caught up Vardin's horse, and ridden on. That night he had removed the loot-filled saddlebags from the animal, and hidden them. And kept on going, fast.

HOME in Texas, Niles had returned to a normal way of living. He'd married, worked the ranch his wife had inherited, but he'd never had true peace of mind. His conscience had troubled him, and he had worried more and more as time passed. Finally he had confided in his wife, and she had urged him to write a letter to the bank in Kansas. Two detectives had come in answer to the letter; the bank had employed them to investigate, in the hope of recovering the loot. They had been understanding men, and taken Ben Niles for a basically honest man. The three had prepared to go after the hidden money, but the night before they were to start on the trip, Russ Vardin had showed up.

Niles had left the outlaw for dead, two years before, but Vardin had recovered from his wound—and for two years had been hunting Ben Niles. At last learning his whereabouts, Vardin had stealthily approached the ranch headquarters. He'd overheard Niles and one of the detectives talking over their plans, and upon being discovered, had killed the detective, whose name had been Mason. Vardin had escaped.

When the other detective arrived from a visit to town, he'd blamed Ben Niles for killing his partner. After hearing the story from Mrs. Niles, Wayne Morgan had ridden to Valido and talked with the young rancher in his cell. He'd learned that the second detective, known only to Niles as Mr. Smith, had left the day before, by train, to find the loot cache—in the Cherokee Strip. And Niles had been sure that Vardin was following Smith, to grab the money and no doubt kill the detective.

Having gained Niles's confidence, Morgan had been fired by a desire to save the rancher from the gallows and see him returned to his family. He had rejoined his partner, Blue Hawk, and started upon that mission.

They had caught the next train north, shipping their horses in a cattle car. The train had been a combination freight and passenger. They'd traveled as far as Hennesey, and then left the train. No stops were being made in the Strip, for it was being cleared for the Run. Morgan's inquiries turned up the information that two men such as he described had appeared separately at a livery stable to buy horses, and that they had ridden on north. That was all Morgan had, descriptions given him by Ben Niles. He had never seen Smith or Vardin.

But the trail had been lost beyond Hennessey, for both Smith and Vardin had been swallowed up by the thousands of would-be homesteaders waiting to pour into the Strip. Tonight the Masked Rider had been prowling, swooping down on outlaws mingling with the honest boomers, frightening them, questioning them in the hope that they could tell him of Russ Vardin's whereabouts — but having no luck until he stumbled upon the attacked Randall camp.

PERHAPS three miles from the Randall camp, the Masked Rider entered rougher country. Bald rock hills rose about him, and deep among them, where no moonlight reached, was located his hideout camp. Nearing the camp, he uttered a weird cry that resembled the call of a mountain lion. It was a signal, and almost at once an answering cry came—from Blue Hawk.

The Indian appeared from behind a huge boulder as the Masked Rider rode on, saying in good but rather choppy English, "I worried, Senor. You were gone long. You have luck, maybe?"

"A little, *amigo*," said the Masked Rider, dismounting. "And you?"

"A little, Senor."

They walked together, the Masked Rider closely followed by Midnight, and the trail twisted through the rocks. Well hidden was the camp. A small fire burned, the frugal sort of campfire an Indian preferred. Three horses were nearby, a roan, a pinto pack animal, and Blue Hawk's gray. Gear was neatly stacked. In the

faint light of the fire, Blue Hawk was revealed as a fine specimen of his race.

His copper-hued face was noble, highly intelligent. His dark hair was worn long and tied back by a crimson bandeau that encircled his head. He dressed in white shirt and breeches, and there was a crimson sash around his waist. His only weapon at the moment was a sheath-knife, carried in the sash. Yaqui Indians were often held in contempt, but Blue Hawk, mission-educated, had lifted himself high about the ordinary members of his tribe.

He had been the Masked Rider's bosom companion for many years, and only Blue Hawk knew that the Masked Rider was in reality a man named Wayne Morgan. There was devotion in the Yaqui's eyes as he squatted by the fire and looked across at the man in the domino mask.

"I made a little scout, Senor," Blue Hawk said. "West of this place by half a dozen miles I found a bunch of men in a hideout camp. There was no mistaking them. They are of the outlaw breed. I crept close, through the brush, and spied upon them. They talked of preying upon the homesteaders after the Strip is opened."

The Masked Rider nodded; his blue eyes glinted through his mask.

There was always evil, always plenty of wrongdoing for him and Blue Hawk to tackle—more, indeed, than time allowed.

He said, "And one of them looked like our man?"

Blue Hawk nodded. "There was one who answers the description you gave me, but of course I couldn't be sure. He is a big man, Senor, a dangerous man. He walked tall among the others, like a leader of men."

"Only six miles from here?" the Masked Rider said, thoughtfully. "It's past midnight, but we still have much of the night left."

"We go there, Senor?"

"Yes. At once."

"There are a dozen men in the camp."

The Masked Rider smiled. "Since when do we consider the odds?" he asked, and watched the Yaqui return the smile.

AFTER Blue Hawk had saddled his gray, they rode west through the rocky country. The Yaqui led the way, now and again nudging his mount to a faster pace with the heels of his moccasined feet. He was a cat in the dark, and he never forgot a trail. He headed for the outlaw camp by the most direct route, and finally the two riders saw the glare of an oversized campfire ahead through a tangle of brush and rocks. They heard rowdy voices, the harsh voices of men who had abandoned decent pursuits. Evidently these men spent their nights in roistering rather than in sleep.

Blue Hawk led his masked companion around until they were upon a brush-grown knob of ground overlooking the camp, and the Masked Rider saw that the huge campfire served not for warmth but for light. The men gathered around it were a tough-looking bunch, and there were now—by the Masked Rider's count—fourteen of them. Some were drinking from a jug that was passed from hand to hand. Others sat around a spread-out blanket, gambling at cards. Several others were gathered around a horse held by a rope.

A handsome sorrel stallion that was certainly Red Prince.

One of the men looking the animal over was far better dressed than his *companeros*. He was a big man, not only tall but thick through the body, a powerful man. His clothes would have been more suitable to city streets than to a hideout camp. He could have passed for a respectable citizen. Without a doubt, it was Vance Russell.

But was it also Russ Vardin?

That was what the Masked Rider needed to find out.

But how? he wondered.

CHAPTER V

Blue Hawk in Action

DECIDING upon the simplest kind of ruse, the Masked Rider made sure that he and Blue Hawk were well hidden, cupped his hands to his mouth and called out, "Hello, Vardin!"

The entire camp was instantly alert and quiet, but the dudish man showed no more reaction than his fellows. All were merely attentive, and if any of them knew the

shouted name, they revealed no signs. The Masked Rider tried again, "Russ Vardin! I want a word with you!"

Some of the group peered toward the slope, having fixed the position of the voice. Some looked at each other in bewilderment, and finally a stocky man wearing a checked shirt, bullhide chaps and a flat-crowned brown Stetson yelled, "Nobody here by that name, hombre!"

"That dude beside you, friend," the Masked Rider retorted. "He's Vardin. Tell him to come up here. I've got a message for him."

The ruse didn't work.

If the man whom the Masked Rider was trying to bait was Russ Vardin, he concealed the fact surprisingly well. He merely looked at the hardcase in the checked shirt, shook his head, and shrugged. Either the name was unfamiliar to him or he was something of an actor.

Checked-Shirt cupped his hands to his mouth, yelled, "Who are you, hombre? Show yourself—else we'll come up there and see what you're up to. We ain't got anything to hide, but we sure don't like to be spied on. You coming out of that brush?"

Blue Hawk whispered tensely, "Senor!"

The Masked Rider had already seen half a dozen men edging toward the horses at the far side of the camp. In a minute or two, as soon as those hardcases saddled up, there would be trouble. The Masked Rider glanced at his companion. The Yaqui had brought along his bow and arrows, the weapons he favored most, and was now fitting a feathered, flint-pointed shaft to bow-string. "Not yet, *amigo*," the Masked Rider said. "Later, maybe."

He turned the black stallion, rode down the opposite side of the knob. Blue Hawk followed close behind. They traveled but a short distance, then began circling around to the other side of the camp. Behind them, a bunch of riders raced up the knob and began scouring the brush. The Masked Rider gave the Yaqui a grin. They rode on without haste, making surprisingly little noise. Shortly, they were again within sight of the camp. They took cover behind a clump of scrub cottonwoods by a small creek, and settled down to wait.

Blue Hawk leaned from the saddle, to whisper in his partner's ear, "We will try to take the dude away from there, Senor?"

"No. That'd be too risky," the Masked Rider replied, low-voiced. "Besides, I'm not convinced he is the man we're hunting. I want that sorrel horse, *amigo*." He explained why he wanted the animal. "Tonight," he added, with a grin, "you and I will become horse thieves."

They had a long wait.

THE half-dozen men who had ridden out to search were slow in returning. They came back empty-handed, of course, and there was some little talk among the group—uneasy talk, without a doubt—about the man who had hailed the camp. The Masked Rider couldn't hear what was said, the distance being too great, but he watched intently. He was certain that the man he'd suspected of being Russ Vardin showed no more concern about the incident than any of the others.

It was now about three o'clock in the morning, and some of the hardcases spread out their bedrolls and turned in. The card game did not start up again, and apparently the whiskey jug had gone dry. Gradually, the entire bunch had bedded down. This was what the Masked Rider had waited for so patiently.

He waited perhaps another half hour, giving the men in the camp plenty of time to fall into a deep sleep, then he gave Blue Hawk a signal. Leaving the Yaqui to cover him, he rode slowly toward the camp. He circled about the spot where the band kept their mounts in a rope corral, so as not to spook the horses. The sorrel was staked out at the far side, alone. The Masked Rider was grateful that the stolen horse hadn't been thrown in with the other animals. But he was somewhat uneasy because Red Prince was still nervous from being handled by strangers. The sorrel might snort in new panic when approached by yet another strange human, or even start fighting when its rope was slipped from the picket stake. And any slight sound would certainly arouse the sleeping men. Without a doubt, the Masked Rider was risking his life to recover Red Prince for his owner.

The black stallion seemed to sense the danger, to realize the need for quiet. He eased his steel-shod hoofs down carefully. He gave no toss of his fine head that

would start bit-chains jingling. Midnight responded to his rider's right hand, which lay against his sleek neck, and at last he inched up to the skittish sorrel.

It was a strange thing to witness, and the nerve-taut man in black was awed. It was the nature of stallions to distrust each other, and to fight for no reason at all. But these two handsome man-tamed beasts—the calm black and the edgy red —belied their heritage of hostility. Midnight nuzzled Red Prince. The Masked Rider leaned from the saddle and caught up the sorrel's rope.

He tugged at the rope, pulled hard, but the stake held to the ground.

The sorrel stamped and switched, whinnied.

A voice growled, "What—what's that?"

Another, less sleepy, bellowed, "Somebody's stealing the sorrel!"

All in a second the whole camp was aroused. Men leapt from their blankets grabbing for their guns. The man who'd paid to have Red Prince stolen, who called himself Vance Russell, fired the first shot. He shouted, "Get him! But don't kill the sorrel!"

THE Masked Rider's heart seemed to be in his mouth. He jerked at the picket rope with all his might, and now it came free of the deeply planted stake. Gunshots crashed, but now the man in the domino mask was on the move. And from the cottonwood clump came feathered death, as Blue Hawk let loose his arrows. The stocky tough in the checked shirt and chaps had ruined Vance Russell's aim by colliding with him. Now Checked-Shirt yelled, "It's the Masked Rider! There's a bounty on his hide, and I'm collecting it! Let me have the tricky son!"

The hardcase was taking careful aim on the Masked Rider when the first arrow from the Yaqui's yew-wood bow found its mark. Checked-Shirt's gun roared, but the shot went wild as the arrow drove into shoulder. He went down howling with as much fear as agony, and some of the others, who were shooting wildly, yelled, "Injuns! Watch it! There's Injuns!"

Black stallion and red wheeled sharply. The Masked Rider, low over Midnight's neck, had a short line on the sorrel now. He had both horses hitting a lope. A man ran to head him off, six-gun uplifted. An arrow caught the hardcase in the throat, and Blue Hawk again saved the Masked Rider's life. Behind the fleeing black-clad horseman, another gunman went down with a tufted shaft jutting from his chest.

The Masked Rider glanced back and saw that Vance Russell, intent on staying alive, had dropped to the ground and was lying flat. Others of the outlaw band were following Russell's example. Fear gripped them all, yet most would have remembered, but for their alarm, that this part of the country had been free of hostile Indians for more than a decade. But their panic gave the Masked Rider his chance. As guns blasted at non-existent warriors, he raced into the brush.

When he was beyond bullet range, the Masked Rider raised his voice in the eerie, blood-curdling cry of the mountain cats. And Blue Hawk answered it. At the halfway point to their own camp, the Yaqui caught up with his partner. They slowed the horses to an easier pace, rode side

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by side, and Blue Hawk looked admiringly at the sorrel.

"A fine horse, Senor," he said. "But not worth risking your life for. For a little while, I was worried. They are bad hombres. They not only stole the animal, but would have killed you to keep it. And one of them knew that there are lawmen who would pay a reward for you—dead."

The Masked Rider nodded, almost grimly.

"It's true. I did risk my life," he said. "And I still don't know if the big man in the fine clothes is Russ Vardin. It's not long until dawn, *amigo*. When daylight comes, Wayne Morgan will return the sorrel to its owner. And you will keep watch on the man who calls himself Vance Russell."

"But, Senor—"

"Yes, Blue Hawk?"

"I think this is not a good plan, Senor," the Yaqui said solemnly. "I fear for you. Those outlaws will make a search, and if, when daylight comes, they see Wayne Morgan with the sorrel—"

He didn't finish the sentence.

But the Masked Rider knew what the Indian meant. If any of the outlaws saw Wayne Morgan with the sorrel, they would know that he was the Masked Rider. But that was another risk that had to be faced. When the Masked Rider gave his word, he kept it.

CHAPTER VI

Wayne Morgan—Saddle Bum

AS they neared their own camp, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk heard a bunch of noisy riders somewhere behind them. "Seems as though those hombres got over their Indian scare," the Masked Rider said, chuckling. His companion's smile was brief.

"That Vance Russell won't be fooled so easily again, Senor," Blue Hawk said gravely. "I know his kind. He'll take it hard, his having been outwitted, and he won't forget. The Masked Rider has made a bad enemy this time."

The Masked Rider nodded silent agreement.

He had no proof that Vance Russell was the man he sought, Russ Vardin, but he did not doubt that Russell was unscrupulous. It was a case of a man being known by the company he kept. Russell's companions in that hideout camp were dyed-in-the-wool badmen; the Masked Rider had encountered enough such men during his outside-the-law career to know the lawless breed by sight. Unlike his companions, Vance Russell was no ordinary badman. The man hired others for petty chores, saving himself for larger schemes, and that made him all the more dangerous.

The sound of the searching riders faded to the north, and the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk safely reached their camp.

The night was gone. A gray trace of dawn appeared in the sky to the east. It had been a sleepless night, one of great activity, but neither of the pair showed signs of weariness. They off-saddled their mounts, tied the sorrel to a bush, then Blue Hawk fed a little fuel to the embers of the fire and prepared to rustle up breakfast. The Masked Rider removed his black accoutrements—peaked sombrero, domino mask, cape, gun rig. These trade-marks of the Robin Hood outlaw went into the *alforja* bags on Midnight's saddle. He kept his .45 Colts out.

From the bags on another saddle, he took a plain oak-tanned gun-rig and buckled it about his lean middle. He placed the undistinctive cedar-gripped revolvers in the holsters. He next took a worn and weathered Stetson, gray in color and flat-crowned, from one of the saddlebags. Standing there, reshaping the hat, Wayne Morgan looked like an ordinary cowhand.

His skin was deeply bronzed, his face was ruggedly handsome. He stood a little over six feet tall in his plain work boots. He wore a dark gray flannel shirt, faded levis. His hair was dark, his eyes were a pleasant blue. His manner changed with his costume, and he walked to the fire with a cowboy's unhurried gait. His voice lost its crisp force and depth, took on a drawl that had a hint of laziness in it. "Sure am hungry," he said, watching Blue Hawk fill the skillet with bacon.

THE sun was up by the time they'd eaten. After clearing away the breakfast things and scattering the fire, they

saddled up. Morgan was riding not Midnight but his roan cowpony, a wiry, hammerheaded mount such as any cowboy might own. Mounting, he swung over to where the sorrel was tethered. He untied Red Prince, towed the hunter to the little stream. He let the two horses drink. A little later he and Blue Hawk rode out. The black stallion, Midnight, and the pinto pack-horse remained unguarded at the camp.

It was broad daylight now, and they rode warily. But there were no signs of other riders here in the rough country, and Morgan was sure that Vance Russell and his companions had given up the search to get some sleep.

He said finally, "We'll part here, *amigo*. Watch that Russell hombre, and don't lose track of him. If he's our man, I've a hunch he plans to go into the Strip tonight. He hasn't much time left to get hold of that bank loot. While you're keeping an eye on him, I'll try to locate that detective named Smith."

Blue Hawk vanished into the rocks and brush, heading toward the outlaw camp, and Wayne Morgan, lifting his roan and the sorrel to a lope, went on toward the Randall camp.

He arrived at the tree-fringed hollow an hour and a half later, and found Dick Larue hitching the Randall horses to the wagon. Mrs. Randall and Tess were packing the camp things into the wagon. The wounded Henry Randall sat on a blanket, his back to the trunk of a tree, smoking his pipe. The body of the horse thief killed by the Masked Rider had disappeared. Young Danny leapt from behind some bushes. He was wearing a mask much like the Masked Rider's domino, which his mother or sister must have made for him, and he pointed a gun whittled from a piece of wood at Wayne Morgan.

"Stick 'em up!" the youngster yelped.

Morgan pretended to be startled. "Who —who are you?"

"The Masked Rider, that's who!" the boy retorted. "What're you doing with our horse, hombre?"

The others began to laugh, and Dick Larue hurried forward.

The cowboy from the Chickasaw Nation exclaimed, "It's Red Prince, all right! Where'd you get him, stranger?"

Morgan swung down, drawled, "Was camped back yonder. A masked hombre I'd run into before showed up at dawn with the sorrel. He told me to bring it here. He said too that you folks would want me to help you make the Run and stake a claim in the Strip—for a couple of dollars." He showed a lazy grin. "Me, I figure it should be worth all of ten dollars. I'm out of a job, just a saddle bum, and I could use some dinero. What do you say?"

Henry Randall said, from where he was seated, "You're hired, friend. You must be Wayne Morgan. If the Masked Rider recommends you, you're bound to be all right. He's one of the best. Saved Dick's life last night. Got back Red Prince, like he promised. He's sure—"

Morgan didn't hear the rest of Randall's praise for the Masked Rider. He was wondering what had become of the dead outlaw. He said, "That masked hombre told me he'd killed a horse thief here. You bury the nogood?"

RANDALL shook his head. "Dick rode over to the starting line before sun-up, and told the soldiers what had happened here. They came back with him and removed the dead man. Stupid as oxen, those soldiers. They were more interested in asking questions about the Masked Rider than about the men who stole my sorrel."

Morgan nodded. He could understand that.

The soldiers would have learned from lawmen that the Masked Rider was a wanted man—with more than one reward offered for his capture, dead or alive. It was ironic, but over the years the Masked Rider had come to be blamed for many crimes committed by real outlaws. Wayne Morgan himself, however, had managed to avoid the breath of suspicion, and there were lawmen—important peace officers like Jim Hatfield of the Texas Rangers and Colonel Beauvine of the Cattleman's Protective Association — who were his good friends. The soldiers would not molest Wayne Morgan.

"We're breaking camp," Henry Randall said, "and moving to a safer place. We'll stay close to the starting line until the Run."

"I'll meet you there," Morgan said.

Randall looked surprised. "You're not staying with us?"

"I've got a chore to do," Morgan said, mounting his roan. "But I'll be on hand for the Run tomorrow. Don't worry that I'll forget."

He nodded to Dick Larue, lifted his hat to the two women, and turned away. The kid, Danny, fired on him from behind a tree. "Bang, bang!" the boy yelled.

Wayne Morgan grinned.

The Masked Rider had a pint-sized imitator.

Half an hour later, Morgan approached the greatest gathering of people he had ever seen on the prairies. They were encamped along a line that ran east and west, thousands of them—men mostly, but many of them women and children. The line extended one hundred and sixty-five miles, and there were more thousands of people gathered elsewhere along it. Altogether, it was estimated, there were a hundred thousand homesteaders waiting at the Strip's four boundaries. Morgan saw covered wagons, huge and clumsy and slow. He saw all manner of light rigs—buckboards, spring wagons, buggies, sulkies. But most of the boomers had saddle mounts for the Run.

Most of the homesteaders gathered here meant to race up the old Chisholm Trail, and there was a lively trade in places at the portion of the line near the trail. Some of the boomers had been waiting for three weeks. Cavalrymen patrolled the line and rode through the crowd to keep order. There was an occasional outbreak of trouble, caused mostly by rotgut whiskey. Morgan saw a couple of men with a canvas-sheeted wagon furtively selling liquor when the soldiers were not close. He recognized one of the whiskey sellers as a man named Easy Ed Hanlon, who had owned saloons in various Texas cowtowns.

Morgan rode slowly through the vast, disorderly camp. He was seeking the killer, Jess Vardin, and a detective named Smith. It was like hunting the proverbial needle in a haystack.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

TRIGGERS ON THE YELLOWWATER

By T. W. FORD

CHAPTER VII

Needle in the Haystack

BY midday, Wayne Morgan had stared into several thousand faces and peered into the crowd of constantly milling people for a pudgy little man dressed in a black suit and a hard round hat—Smith's description—until he was a little bleary eyed. He was growing impatient. There was little time left. Tomorrow, at noon, the Run would start. The Cherokee Strip would be overrun with a stampeding swarm of homesteaders, and then the bank loot might be lost forever. The cache might be stumbled upon by some homesteader who would take the loot and vanish. Smith would have realized that, and no doubt would attempt to recover the money before the Run. Vardin would be aware of it, too, and he would be watching the detective's every move.

Morgan had questioned the imprisoned Ben Niles closely, after gaining the young rancher's confidence, and Niles had been sure that he and the now dead detective, Mason, had not mentioned the location of the cache while Russ Vardin eavesdropped. Upon being discovered, Vardin had fired two shots and then fled. He had no doubt planned to return and force Ben Niles to reveal the hiding-place, but in the meantime the other Amberton operative had arrested the rancher; and Niles, in jail, had been beyond Vardin's reach.

So now Vardin would be watching Smith like a hawk, ready to trail him into the Strip—or jump him when he returned from it with the loot.

A thought occurred to Wayne Morgan, as he rode slowly through the multitude. Smith wouldn't act alone. He was merely a private detective, but still he was vested with a measure of authority. He could appeal to the Army officers for permission—and maybe an escort—to enter the Strip before the Run. It was even possible that Smith had already taken such a step.

On the other hand, as Morgan knew from experience, Army officers were usually reluctant to grant permission for anything in conflict with their orders.

Their orders were to clear the Strip, and to keep it clear. They would—and no power on earth would stop the U. S. Army—carry out their orders. Wayne Morgan could visualize some shavetail lieutenant frowning over Smith's irregular request, refusing to accept the responsibility, passing the buck upward to his captain. That request might well become snarled up in red tape, while Smith's time ran short.

WAYNE Morgan had a hunch that Smith had not yet entered the Strip. So he continued to search, vainly. In midafternoon, he came upon a homesteader family just sitting down to a meal. He stopped, offered to pay for some grub, and thus satisfied his hunger. He was just about to leave the family when one of the numerous children cried, "Look; a real, live Indian!"

Morgan looked, and hid a smile.

It was a blanket Indian wearing a black sombrero without any shape to the crown but with a feather sticking from it at a jaunty angle. The buck rode a familiar gray horse, otherwise Morgan might not have recognized Blue Hawk. Mounting, Morgan rode after the Yaqui and swung in alongside of him. "Hardly knew you, *amigo*," he said, in greeting.

The blanket Indian grunted, "Ugh!"

He remained slack on his horse, looking abject, but he gave Morgan a glance out of humorous black eyes. Then he said, low-voiced, "The outlaw band slept only a little while, Senor. Then they saddled up and rode out. They separated into pairs upon reaching the crowd here. I followed the one named Russell. He is now talking with a man you know, a man who sells cheap whiskey—Easy Ed Hanlon. He talked with another man, Jake DeLong and—"

"DeLong! He was one of Doc Holliday's friends in Tombstone."

"A man with coyote blood, Senor," Blue Hawk whispered. "He told Russell something that made them both smile. I rode close, tried to buy some firewater from Hanlon. While Hanlon cursed me for a no-good redskin, I listened. Russell told DeLong, 'Keep your eye on him. He's having trouble with the Army. We'll jump him when he leaves the soldiers.' I followed DeLong."

"Where is he now, Blue Hawk?"

"Yonder," the Yaqui muttered, giving a slight nod. "Now I'll go back and watch Russell."

He turned away even as Morgan picked out Jake DeLong who was not far ahead in the crowd, afoot but leading a saddle horse. DeLong's usual profession was that of gambler, but he had a reputation for trying every way of coming by money except through honest work. He was a rail-thin man with a funeral countenance. His bony face had pale, almost colorless eyes, a hooked nose, a thin traplike mouth.

He wore a black suit and a black flat-crowned hat with a medium brim. He halted by a little stream that served as a watering-place for many of the homesteaders, leaned against his horse, and lighted a cigarette. People came and went to the stream, carrying pails, but DeLong paid no attention to them.

HE WAS watching a neat camp on the far side of the creek, an Army bivouac. There were a dozen tents in a row, one a headquarters tent before which stood a sentry. Half a dozen troopers lounged about the picket line where their mounts were tethered. The horses were all bays. A dun horse rigged with a ranch saddle stood ground-hitched near the headquarters tent. Jake DeLong pretended a total lack of interest in the camp, but Wayne Morgan knew that the man was watching it.

And he was sure of something more: Smith was there.

It worked out, a pattern in which the pieces all fitted.

DeLong was watching Smith's every move, for Vance Russell, therefore Russell was—Russ Vardin!

Excitement gripped Wayne Morgan. His next move was clear. He must get Vardin alone, away from his tough friends, and somehow force him to confess to killing the other detective, Mason, down in Texas. And he had to accomplish that before Vardin, alias Russell, made a move against Smith. How it was to be accomplished, Morgan did not yet know. It would take some doing!

A sergeant strode from the headquarters tent, barked an order. Four cavalrymen came alive, started to saddle their mounts. One of them was a corporal, and the sergeant crossed to him and talked to

him at length. The corporal kept nodding.

A lieutenant, a young fellow with a wispy blonde mustache, came from the tent followed by a short and rather fat man of about fifty who wore a black suit and a derby hat. Both the officer and the civilian—whom Wayne Morgan took for Smith—looked angry. Evidently they'd had a heated argument, and Smith had won out only after he'd lost his temper.

The four troopers were mounted now, and the lieutenant crossed to them. As he gave the soldiers orders, Smith climbed onto the dun horse.

On the near side of the creek, Jake DeLong threw himself into the saddle, swung his horse about, and rode east at a hard lope. Morgan looked after him, guessing that DeLong was on his way to report to Russ Vardin that Smith had gotten permission—and an escort—and was on his way into the Strip.

Morgan glanced back at the camp. Smith, followed by the four troopers, was fording the creek.

Once across, they swung past Wayne Morgan at a canter. He fell in behind them, followed at a distance of but ten yards. They passed along the south side of the encamped boomers, evidently heading for the Chisholm Trail. And, Morgan realized with sudden alarm, Russ Vardin was waiting at Easy Ed Hanlon's wagon with his tough hands nearby. Hanlon's whiskey peddling wagon was located in the densest part of the encampment, where the old cattle trail crossed the starting-line.

CHAPTER VIII

Riot

MORGAN was certain of but one thing. Vardin wouldn't dare follow Smith and his escort across the line. Such a move would make him appear a sooner and cause his immediate arrest. As Morgan saw it, there were two alternatives for Russ Vardin. The outlaw could wait until Smith returned from his trip into the Strip, then attempt to wrest the bank loot from him. Or Vardin could now, before Smith crossed the line, make an attempt to seize the detective. With Smith in his hands, and defenseless, a man like Russ Vardin could find a way to extract information—the location of the cache—from him.

Now that Smith had soldiers to guard him, Morgan didn't see how Vardin could get hold of the pudgy little operative. It would be as risky as what Wayne Morgan himself planned—taking Vardin a prisoner from under the watchful eyes of his tough companions. Still, Morgan was watchful as he followed Smith and the soldiers.

He saw Easy Ed Hanlon's wagon ahead, and a huge crowd of men were gathered around it. It looked as though Hanlon and his helper, obviously a bartender, were serving free drinks. Boomers swarmed around the rear of the wagon, everyone of them armed with a tincup or some other vessel that would hold whiskey. Hanlon and his helper were busily tapping a barrel. Mingling with the boomers were mounted men, and Morgan recognized several of them as having been at the outlaw camp. These riders were not concerned about obtaining free whiskey. They were watchful, alert.

Russ Vardin, alias Vance Russell, was sitting a horse off to one side, and with him was the funereal-looking Jake DeLong. Beyond them was Blue Hawk, still looking like a spiritless blanket Indian. Morgan was suddenly convinced that an attempt to seize Smith was about to be made.

Jake DeLong had ridden fast to tell Vardin that Smith was coming that way, and Vardin—as clever as Morgan had taken him to be—had instantly put into motion the scheme he had worked out earlier. It had taken but a couple of minutes to gather a crowd with an offer of free drinks. Even less time had been required to gather those tough riders, who no doubt had been told earlier of how to act when Smith appeared. Morgan was puzzled about what would happen now, but not for long.

As Smith and the soldiers came alongside the wagon, Vardin's riders went into action. With shouted oaths, they rode through the thirsty boomers. They rode some men down, lashed at others with quirts and the ends of lariats. Men screamed in pain and fear, or yelled in

sudden anger. All in an instant, there was bedlam. The crowd was milling crazily, and men began battering each other for no other reason than that of mob hysteria. Other men came running from every direction, swelling the fighting mob. Easy Ed Hanlon and his helper had grabbed clubs from the wagon, and they jumped into the wild melee.

Smith and the soldiers were caught in the midst of it, and now Wayne Morgan, seeing how cleverly Vardin had planned, themselves. They were attacked without warning. Six-guns struck without mercy —hard blows to the base of the skull. The soldiers spilled from their horses, the corporal taking two blows before he tumbled from the saddle. Morgan was fifty feet away from Smith, and still hampered in his movements by the rioting boomers. He yelled, "Smith, watch out! Behind you!"

The detective was a poor rider, and he was having trouble controlling his

BLUE HAWK

kneed his roan and attempted to push through to the detective. To avoid trampling a fallen man, Morgan neck-reined the roan sharply to the right. This brought him up against the side of the wagon, and now the frenzied mob pressed in against him. He was cornered for a moment, unable to move without riding down some of the berserk boomers.

In that moment, it happened.

HALF a dozen of Vardin's riders, pushing through without regard to how many men were hurt by their mounts, closed in on the soldiers. The troopers, intent only upon getting through the throng, did not realize the need to defend spooked horse. But he looked back over his shoulder, and alarm showed on his fat face as he saw that the soldiers were sprawled on the ground. The next instant Vardin's riders closed in on him. One jabbed a gun into his back, another caught Smith's horse by its reins. The others began forcing him through the crowd.

Morgan knew what Smith now faced—torture and perhaps death—and he did the only thing possible to try and save the man. He drew one of his Colts, fired a shot over the heads of Vardin's hardcases. He'd hoped to scare them off, but that shot merely served to direct the attention of the mob toward him.

A man yelled, "Get him! He's one of

the toughs that started it!" Others swung toward Morgan, threateningly. Somebody threw a rock, and his aim was good. Morgan tried to duck, but the missile struck him on the left temple. Pain exploded in his head, blinded him. He managed to holster his gun, and then he had to grab his saddle horn to keep in the saddle. Fists beat at him. Hands clawed at him, tried to pull him from his horse. Fear knifed through him. He knew that if he was dragged to the ground, he'd most certainly be beaten to death.

Seldom did Wayne Morgan use spurs on a horse, but now his danger justified his using them. He clung firmly to the pommel, rowelled the already nervous roan. The hammerhead cowpony reared high, forefeet kicking savagely, and Morgan's attackers, screaming and cursing, fell back. Morgan's vision cleared somewhat, and he saw Blue Hawk, no longer abject looking in his blanket and black hat, riding toward him. The Yaqui cleared a way for his gray by uttering a war cry, and shortly he was beside Morgan.

"You all right, Senor?" he asked anxiously.

"Just dazed, *amigo*. Can we get away from here?"

Blue Hawk wasn't sure, for the angry throng still hemmed them in—as threatening as ever. But now there was a drumming of hoofs. A detail of cavalry came up at a gallop, and sight of the soldiers caused panic among the boomers. The mob was in instant flight, scattering in every direction.

At least a score lay sprawled unconscious or sat holding battered heads. Two of the felled soldiers had got up, but the other two were still lying unconscious. The lieutenant Wayne Morgan had seen at the camp by the creek was riding at the head of the detail, and he demanded brusquely, "What's going on here, anyway?"

The corporal who had been in charge of the escort for Smith was one of the two who'd regained his feet. He stood swaying, however, and his salute was sloppy. "A riot, sir," he said thickly. "We were caught in the middle of it."

The officer looked around. "Where's Smith?"

"I—I don't know, sir," the corporal stammered.

THERE was a moment of silence while the lieutenant tried not to explode with anger. Then he noticed Easy Ed Hanlon and his helper standing with simulated innocence at the rear of the wagon. "You and your whiskey, Hanlon!" the officer shouted. "I'd bet a month's pay that you're to blame!"

Hanlon was a florid faced man with a bland look. He said quietly, "Sure, Lieutenant. I sold a little whiskey. But I didn't start the trouble. There was a bunch of hardcased riders and—"

The lieutenant's angry gaze settled on Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk. "You two with that bunch?" he demanded.

Blue Hawk was acting like Lo, the Poor Indian again.

Morgan looked exactly like a cowhand. "No, sir," he said civilly. "I just happened by, after the fighting started. I saw a bunch of riders knock those four soldiers off their horses and then take the civilian away. I fired a shot, trying to save the man, but then somebody hit me with a rock. When I got over being dazed, those tough hombres were gone. Then you came along, Lieutenant."

The officer seemed inclined to believe him.

Morgan said, "It's none of my business, of course, Lieutenant, but it looks as though that fat little man is in danger. Maybe you'd better try to get him away from those toughs."

"I don't need advice from you, mister," the officer growled, but it was evident that Morgan's words had made up his mind for him. He told the injured corporal to take his three men back to the camp. He glanced at his sergeant, told him that the detail would pursue the riders. There were six troopers in the detail. "Which way did they head?" the lieutenant asked.

Morgan had to admit that he did not know.

Easy Ed Hanlon said, "I didn't notice, Lieutenant."

Blue Hawk grunted, drawing attention to himself. He lifted his right arm, pointed south. "They ride like wind," he said in a guttural tone. "Toward hills."

The lieutenant nodded, swung his arm up in signal, and the detail clattered away. The corporal picked up one of the many tincups strewn about, went over to Hanlon's wagon, tapped some whiskey from

the barrel. He dosed himself, then returned to revive the two still unconscious soldiers. The other trooper was gathering up their horses. Blue Hawk whispered, "What do we do, Senor?"

Morgan had little hope that the soldiers would rescue Smith. He said grimly, "It's up to us, partner. We'll head for the hills."

They swung over to where Easy Ed Hanlon stood, a smug smile on his florid face. Hanlon said, "Have a drink on me, friends?" Morgan shook his head, and asked, "Russ Vardin a friend of yours?"

"Vardin?" Hanlon said, looking puzzled.

"That's his right name. He calls himself Vance Russell now."

"Oh, Russell," said Hanlon, warily. "Maybe he is, maybe he ain't. Why? What's it to you, cowpoke, who I call 'friend'?"

"Maybe it's nothing to me," Morgan said grimly. "But you had a hand in what happened. If Smith should come to harm, if he should be murdered, everybody mixed up with Russ Vardin is apt to find himself in bad trouble."

He turned away, Blue Hawk following. Easy Ed Hanlon stared after them, his bland look fading and an uneasy frown replacing it.

CHAPTER IX

Last Chance

HALF a mile south across the undulating prairies, the eight-man cavalry detail was already traveling fast toward the hills. Morgan and his Yaqui companion followed at an easy lope, not shortening the soldiers' lead. Half an hour later, the patrol already disappeared in the low hills, Wayne Morgan muttered, "That's odd. Those toughs are heading in the direction of their camp. I'd have taken Vardin for being smarter than all that. He should know the soldiers would trail him and try to rescue Smith."

Blue Hawk hadn't discarded his hat and blanket. His disguise, a sketchy one though it was, seemed to make a definite change in him. He grunted, "Trick. You'll see."

But if he had turned miserly with words, the Yaqui wasn't entirely transformed into an Indian made shiftless by contact with the white men. His black eyes were bright, and he was studying the tracks left by the outlaw band and the cavalry detail. There were few men, white or red, who were Blue Hawk's match as a tracker. Morgan knew that the Yaqui, a strange product of two brands of education, would read the scantiest sign accurately. They were close to the hills now, and the country gradually changed from flat grassland to brush and rock. Finally Blue Hawk reined in his gray pony. "Trick, sure," he said.

Morgan halted beside him.

He too was fairly adept at tracking, but here the trail led into a pass between two rocky uplifts. All Morgan could make out was that the Vardin crowd had gone into the pass, and that the cavalrymen had followed. Blue Hawk saw his partner's uncertainty, and pointed to some scrub hackberry trees which grew close enough to form a brush barrier.

Morgan then saw some riders had forced their way through the thicket; they'd left broken branches, and a tuft of horse hair was caught in one of the cracked limbs. Hoof marks showed on the ground between two of the trees, and Blue Hawk said, "Three horses. A trick, Senor. While the soldiers trail the main bunch, three went this way. Soon we'll find signs that one was Smith."

He turned into the hackberry thicket, and Morgan followed. Before they cleared the brush, the Yaqui found something more hooked to a snapped branch. It was a little patch of black material, broadcloth suiting, and certainly it had been ripped from a rider's coat or trousers. "Smith's," Blue Hawk said.

"Maybe," Morgan said. "Vardin was wearing a gray suit, but Jake DeLong was dressed in black. I'm not saying Smith isn't ahead of us, but—"

Blue Hawk broke in, "DeLong's suit is of rough wool. Smith's was like this piece, smooth and better quality." He grinned. "Senor didn't notice?"

Morgan grinned back. "You're just trying to show me up, *amigo*," he retorted. "Let's get going."

The trail led deeper into the rough country, through brush and rocks and timber. The two riders kept moving rapid-

ly for an hour before Morgan caught a movement in a cedar brake ahead. He reached for his saddle gun, and Blue Hawk did likewise. They couldn't muffle the sound of their horses' hoofs, so, knowing that whoever was in the timber would be warned, they lifted their mounts to a gallop.

A startled yell rang out, and Morgan had a glimpse of two riders fleeing through the cedars. They were too far off and too well screened by the trees for him to identify them, but he was sure that they were Russ Vardin and Jake DeLong. As they neared the cedar brake, Morgan saw a ground-hitched dun horse among the trees. He swung toward it, and a moment later came upon Smith lying upon the ground in a crumpled heap.

Morgan yelled, "Trail 'em, Blue Hawk," and dropped from his roan. The Yaqui was already plunging through the timber after the two fleeing riders when Morgan knelt by the unconscious detective.

THERE were a wallet and some papers lying on the ground. After unsuccessfully trying to revive Smith, who'd been badly beaten about the face and head, Wayne Morgan retrieved the wallet and papers. The wallet was empty; without a doubt the two men who had held Smith prisoner had taken its contents. *Money,* Morgan thought—*and what else*? He examined the papers, not because of idle curiosity but because he had a faint hope that he might learn from them something that would help him successfully complete his mission. And he needed help. So far, he'd made little headway. He'd accomplished nothing more than learning that Russ Vardin was even more dangerous and cunning than he'd anticipated.

There was a letter addressed to Mr. A. B. Smith in care of the Drovers Bank, Harmon, Kansas, and signed "your wife, Louise." It had been mailed from Chicago, and it was merely the sort of letter a fond wife would write to her husband. It cautioned "Albert" to be careful, and pointed out that "Western desperadoes are not to be trifled with." The lady was very right. Wayne Morgan felt a little guilty about having read the missive.

A second letter was also from Chicago, from the main offices of the Amberton Detective Agency. It ordered A. B. Smith and F. X. Mason to proceed to Valido, Texas, and investigate a certain Ben Niles. A third document was merely Smith's creditional, stating that he was an operative for the detective agency.

Morgan placed wallet and papers in a neat stack on the ground, then squatted on his heels beside the hurt man. It appeared that Smith had been gun-whipped in brutal fashion. There were cuts, bruises and bumps over his face and head. There was a little blood. The detective still showed no signs of reviving. Morgan rose, recalling that he'd seen a little stream at one side of the cedar brake.

He located the stream, and filled his hat with water. Returning to Smith, he spilled part of the water onto the man's face. That helped. Smith groaned, gasped. Morgan gave him the rest of the water, dousing him with it. The detective sputtered, gasped some more, and opened his eyes. Almost at once, he struggled to get up.

"Take it easy," Morgan told him. "You're safe."

"Who—who're you?" Smith demanded weakly, sitting up. "You're not one of them?"

"No."

"They're gone?"

"Yeah," Morgan drawled. "They high-tailed it."

Smith looked sick. He held his head in his hands. Then he saw his wallet and papers on the ground. He grabbed them up, swore under his breath when he found the wallet empty. "They got it!" he said bitterly. "That pair got what they were after!"

"What did they take besides your money, Mr. Smith?"

"A—a valuable paper," Smith said cautiously. "It was—well, a map."

"A map Ben Niles drew for you?"

"How do you know about that?"

Morgan smiled faintly. "How'd those two hombres know about it?" he parried. When Smith merely stared at him, he added, "The big man was Russ Vardin, the murderer of F. X. Mason."

DESPITE his feeling so badly, A. B. Smith had his wits about him. He said, "Russ Vardin was one of the Maugher wild bunch before it was wiped out. He was, in fact, the brains of that crowd.

But we haven't heard of him in two years. He was wounded after the bank holdup at Harmon, Kansas, in '91, and I have an idea that he died of his wound. The only man who claims Vardin is alive is that crazy galoot down in Texas, Ben Niles. He blamed Mason's murder on Vardin. And I claim he lied."

"You never saw Vardin?"

"He was just a name to the law."

"He was the hombre who engineered your kidnapping today, friend," Morgan said. "And he did kill your partner. Be reasonable. Why would Ben Niles have killed Mason, after voluntarily offering to return the bank loot?"

Smith had an answer for that. "Mason didn't trust Niles," he stated. "I was the fool who trusted that hombre, and Mason was working under me—and so had to be easy on Niles because I wanted it. I figure that Mason was questioning Niles that night while I was at Valido. Maybe he got a little tough, and scared Niles. So Niles killed him and blamed it on Vardin."

"How do you account for the men who attacked you and took your map, if Russ Vardin is dead?" Morgan demanded.

"Niles could have changed his mind about returning the loot," Smith said, but with a trace of uncertainty now in his voice. "He could have got word to some tough friends." He eyed Morgan suspiciously. "How do I account for you?" he demanded.

"Morgan's my name. Wayne Morgan. I'm just a saddle bum, a grubline rider, who happened to talk to Ben Niles in Valido."

"Yeah? What's your game?"

"I want to save Niles from the gallows," Morgan said grimly. "And I'm going to do just that, with or without your help, or die trying. That map—it showed the location of the cache?"

Smith nodded, then groaned as the movement hurt his head.

Morgan said, "Can you find the cache without the map?"

Smith said thickly, "I'm not sure I can. I'm a city man, and I feel lost in this country. Even with the map I was counting on the help of some soldiers to find the cache."

Morgan was just about to reveal that the frightened Ben Niles had described the location of the hidden loot to him, in the utmost detail. He was going to offer to guide Smith to it, if the detective would start a widespread manhunt for Russ Vardin. But suddenly Smith groaned and began to retch. The man was violently sick from the beating he'd taken. There was no use in making a deal with him, Morgan realized. Smith was in no condition to make a trip into the Cherokee Strip.

It was up to the Masked Rider, and the attempt would have to be made tonight. Tomorrow was the Run. Tonight was Russ Vardin's last chance to recover the loot.

CHAPTER X

Ride to the Skeleton

WAYNE MORGAN was impatient to ride on, for, now that he was sure of Russ Vardin's identity, he didn't want to lose track of the outlaw. From what Smith had said, it was clear that Vardin had an amazing talent for dropping out of sight. If the outlaw succeeded in recovering the loot, it was possible that he would vanish without trace. And the important thing, from Wayne Morgan's standpoint, was to apprehend Vardin before nightfall.

When darkness came, and it was now but a couple hours before sundown, Vardin would certainly attempt to sneak into the Strip. He had Ben Niles's map. Tonight was his last chance. Tomorrow it might be too late for Morgan to catch the man and force him to admit that he, not young Ben Niles, had murdered F. X. Mason.

But Smith was in no shape to be left alone.

Morgan couldn't be so heartless as to abandon a man so sick and badly beaten. The tall, bronze-faced cowboy was sure that he had saved Smith's life. Vardin and his companion would have surely killed the detective had not they been scared off. They'd probably beaten Smith in an attempt to make him reveal the location of the cache, then, when he lost consciousness, they'd searched him and found the map. Yes, they would have killed the detective.

Morgan had saved Smith's life, and now

he had the ailing man on his hands. And his mission to save Ben Niles from the gallows was being jeopardized by his reluctance to leave the detective.

Smith groaned, and said weakly, "I was never so sick in my life."

Morgan said, not unkindly but firmly, "You've got to try to get on your horse, friend. I'll take you back and let the soldiers look out for you. I've got to go after Vardin."

SMITH nodded.

"I'll be able to make it if you lend a hand, Morgan."

Morgan found the man's derby, returned it to him. He caught up the dun horse, and helped Smith mount it. He swung onto his roan, then they rode slowly out of the cedar brake. Smith was slumped over his saddlehorn, and every foot of the way was torture for him. They rode at a walk, and much time passed before they reached and rode through the hackberry thicket onto the trail left by the main group of the outlaw band and by the cavalry detail.

They turned north, and after perhaps a mile in that direction, Morgan heard riders coming along behind them. Looking back, he was relieved to see that it was the soldiers. They came on at the cavalry's easy gait, more of a canter than a lope, and they were, of course, empty-handed.

Reining in, the young lieutenant said sourly, "How'd you escape from that crowd, Smith? We trailed them on through the hills without even catching sight of them." He stared with surprise at Wayne Morgan. "You again!" he growled.

Morgan grinned, drawled, "I just happened to find your man in the brush, Lieutenant. Saved his life, I reckon. But he's in a bad way, as you can see. I didn't get to him in time to save him from a gun-whipping." He lifted his reins. "I'll leave him for you to take care of."

Smith said, "Wait a minute, Morgan. I want to talk to you."

Morgan was already turning his roan about. He didn't rein in. When the horse hit a lope, he kept on going.

Behind him Smith said demandingly, "Stop him, Lieutenant! I want to question that man!"

LUCKILY, the officer was reluctant to take orders from a civilian. When he did order two of his men to bring Morgan back, it was too late. Morgan was heading for the brush, and his roan cowpony was running hard. It wasn't long before he lost his pursuers.

Morgan picked up the trail of Vardin and his companion and of Blue Hawk beyond the cedar brakes. It led on through the rough hill country, but not until the sun was low did he overtake the Yaqui. Blue Hawk was then on his way back to report to his partner.

"I followed the two to a ranch about two miles from here, Senor," the Indian said. "I got close enough to make sure of them. It was the man you call Russ Vardin and the gambler, Jake DeLong. A short time ago, the rest of the outlaws rode up to the ranch. They were laughing about how they lost the soldiers."

Morgan frowned.

He had counted on overtaking Vardin and DeLong before they were rejoined by their outlaw band. Now there was slight chance of his being able to seize Vardin.

"What are your plans now, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked.

"There is only one thing for me to do now," Morgan said grimly. "Go into the Strip after dark, find the cache, and stand guard over it until Vardin shows up. I'll have to gamble that he'll come alone or with just a couple men. It doesn't seem likely that he'll bring his entire crowd with him. That many men would lessen his chances of getting past the soldiers."

"And he would not want so many *ladrones* with him when he recovered the loot," Blue Hawk said wisely. "He'd fear that they would try to steal it."

Morgan nodded. "I'm going to our camp, for the Masked Rider's outfit," he said. "You go back and watch that ranch. If Vardin leaves before full dark, you come and tell me how many men he takes with him. If he hasn't left by dark, don't bother. Because by then I'll be on my way into the Strip."

Blue Hawk nodded, headed south.

Morgan turned in the direction of his and the Yaqui's camp. The sun was gone and dusk was gathering when he reached it. He off-saddled and rubbed down the roan, then built a fire and cooked his

supper. After eating, he saddled Midnight and donned the Masked Rider's black attire—sombrero, mask, cape, gunrig.

He waited until full dark, and then with Blue Hawk not having come, he mounted and rode out.

He rode northeast, intending to skirt the vast encampment of boomers gathered by the Chisholm Trail. The Masked Rider knew that many soldiers were concentrated along that section of the line, and he wanted to make his crossing at some lonely spot not guarded but merely patrolled at intervals.

MIDNIGHT was eager to run, and, except for the drumming of the stallion's hoofs, it might have been but a shadow gliding through the night. Luckily, the rising moon was smudged out by clouds as the black-clad horseman neared the line.

He saw a couple of homesteader camps, and they marked the beginning of the Strip for him.

A yell reached out as he swung past one of the camps, and a dog started an excited yelping.

The Masked Rider believed that boldness often served better than caution, and he didn't slow up to look for patrolling cavalrymen. He headed into the Strip at a hard lope, and if there had been soldiers, they would have been hard put even to follow him. The Masked Rider would have matched Midnight's speed against any army mount, even to the point of gambling his life on the outcome. But there were no soldiers there, and he raced on across the dark prairies.

Smith, the detective, may have needed a map, but the Masked Rider had the country charted in his memory. Ben Niles had told him, as Wayne Morgan, that he'd cached the bank loot east of Skeleton Creek where the Boggy joined the Skeleton. About five miles east, Niles had said. After hiding the money, Niles had ridden on west until he reached the railroad which, like the Chisholm Trail, ran north and south. Niles had off-saddled his horse and Vardin's which he was leading and turned them loose.

He'd waited for a freight train to come along, jumped it, and ridden it home to Texas. He'd cached the money near the headquarters of an abandoned ranch that had been leased from the Indians at some earlier time. There was a creek and a big willow tree near the ranch building, and the loot was hidden beneath the willow. Midnight ate up the miles, forded the Skeleton, raced on. It was short-grass prairie, knobby surfaced, with occasional washes exposing the red soil.

Swinging north along the Skeleton to find its confluence with the Boggy, the Masked Rider rode into trouble.

The clouds suddenly bared the moon, and as the pale but crystal-clear light bathed the prairies, a shout rose. "There's a sooner!"

The Masked Rider saw four cavalrymen directly ahead.

Just in time to avoid running into them, he swerved west. He hit the Skeleton, splashed across, and the soldiers came after him.

A carbine cracked, and a slug whined past the Masked Rider's head.

Now was the time to prove that Midnight could outrun cavalry horses!

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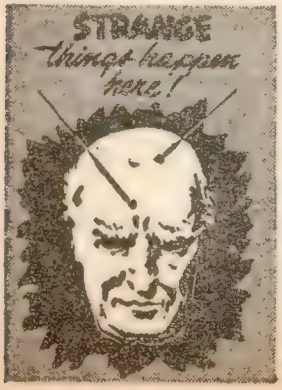

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CHAPTER XI

The Cache

RAPIDLY the big stallion drew away from the soldiers, but his rider had to face the fact that the animal was already winded from the fast pace it had maintained since coming into the Strip. A couple more shots sounded, but now the Masked Rider was beyond accurate shooting range of men firing from running horses. The moonlight kept him from losing his pursuers, however, and he began to get worried.

Finally he topped a prairie swell and saw a clump of trees, blackjack oaks, not far ahead. The Masked Rider veered toward the center of the thicket. A ruse had occurred to him, and it might work if the soldiers, believing that he was hiding among the trees, would search there for even a short time.

He slowed his mount to a less reckless pace as he entered the trees, but traveled straight through the clump. Once he broke out the far side, the Masked Rider rode but a hundred yards farther. He reined in, hastily dismounted, then led the winded Midnight to a deeply eroded wash. It was fringed by some low brush, and this, when the Masked Rider drew the stallion into the wash, partially screened them.

He put his arm about Midnight's neck, said low-voiced, "Down, boy! Down!" Obedient to the pressure on his neck and the urgent command, the black got down like a well-trained circus horse. It was a trick that the Masked Rider had taught Midnight long ago—and had used to advantage on other occasions. The stallion played dead, and would remain still so long as his rider lay beside him with that light pressure on his sleek neck.

The soldiers weren't greenhorns at manhunting, however. Gaining the blackjacks, they split up. Two rode into the thicket. The other two circled the timber, one to the north and one to the south. The circling pair met west of the thicket, and the Masked Rider could hear their voices.

"See him?"

"Naw."

"He's in there, then."

"Sure. Those fool sooners always hide in the 'jacks."

One voice lifted to a shout. "Hey, Sarge! He didn't come out, but he will if you beat the brush for him. Then we'll grab him!"

The Masked Rider heard no reply from within the thicket just then, but the sounds of the two riders there reached him. Finally, a new voice shouted angrily, "You two must be blind. Sure, he rode out that side. He's not in here."

An argument started, the two troopers yelling back at the sergeant and the man with him. Shortly all four men were among the trees and riding to and fro. The Masked Rider smiled when he heard the sergeant bellow, "You two trying to tell me he vanished into thin air?"

HIS smile soon faded, however, for the cavalrymen wouldn't give up the search. Precious time was fleeing while the Masked Rider lay in that gully. He was almost certain that he wouldn't be found. The soldiers seemed to think that a sooner would keep on running if he didn't hole up in some handy blackjacks. If they'd noticed the shallow gully at all, it certainly didn't occur to them that a horse and rider could hide in it. Finally, after perhaps half an hour, the four came riding from the trees and halted halfway between the thicket and the wash.

"It beats me."

"Yeah. He couldn't have ridden on without us seeing him."

"Not in this moonlight."

"Well, he's gone. What's one sooner, anyway?"

"Got any makings?"

The Masked Rider stroked Midnight's neck, whispered to him to steady him. He saw shortly the flare of a match, then another. The soldiers smoked in silence, sitting their mounts. It seemed an eternity to the man hiding in the gully. He was growing anxious. Russ Vardin could have reached the cache by now.

It was the Masked Rider's rule never to use arms against honest lawmen or soldiers doing their duty. But now he was tempted to get the drop on these four and put them afoot so that he could go his way. He could take their horses a few miles, then turn them loose so that they could be found when daylight came. He would

give them only a couple minutes longer.

The cigarettes were thrown away, reluctantly, and the voices came again.

"I'd give a month's pay—"

"Forget it, Sarge."

"Yeah, Sarge. Maybe there wasn't any sooner."

"That's it, Sarge. You just imagined it."

The sergeant swore mildly. "So I was the only one that saw him?"

"I didn't."

"Me, either."

"Nor me."

The sergeant swore again, not so mildly. "You three'll get some stable detail when we get back to Reno," he growled. "Make a monkey out of me, will you? Say, let's ride over to that land office on the Boggy. The agent keeps a coffee pot on the stove—"

They got into motion, crossing the gully about thirty yards from where the Masked Rider was hiding, and struck out north across the prairie at a canter. Sighing with relief, the Masked Rider let Midnight get to his feet. He swung to the saddle, climbed from the wash, and headed east.

He lifted the black to a lope.

He was still about eight miles from the cache.

And he had a hunch that if Russ Vardin hadn't already been there, the outlaw would arrive at the spot any minute now.

BECAUSE Midnight had done a lot of running already tonight, the Masked Rider alternated the stallion's pace between a lope and a fast walk—not wanting to run the fine animal into the ground. So it took him more than an hour to come within sight of the abandoned headquarters of the lease ranch. There were only two small buildings, one a log cabin and the other of planks. The willow tree rose high above the ramshackle buildings, its long drooping leaves silvery in the moonlight. A few scrub cottonwoods grew along the small stream.

The Masked Rider reined in, studied the scene.

He saw a movement near the willow, heard a sound that suggested a shovel striking stone as it dug into the earth, and knew that he was too late. Too late to surprise Russ Vardin riding in, but not too late to jump the man without the advantage of surprise on his side.

The Masked Rider turned north, walking his horse across the carpet of grass that helped muffle the sound of its hoofs. He gained the scant cover of the cottonwoods, and there dismounted. He pulled the Winchester from Midnight's saddleboot, and went on afoot. He moved at a crouch, trying to make himself the smallest sort of shadow possible, and he gained the first of the old ranch buildings without being seen.

He could see what was going on about the willow from this point. Three saddle horses stood ground-hitched by the huge tree. Three men were standing close to the gnarled trunk, one wielding a shovel. Ben Niles had told Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider recalled, that he'd found a shovel in one of the ranch buildings and used it to bury the loot.

He'd also found a piece of canvas, and had wrapped the money-laden saddlebags in the tarpaulin before placing them in the ground. Without a doubt, the map in Russ Vardin's possession had shown these three men exactly where to dig and they'd come equipped with the shovel.

A stray thought came to the Masked Rider in this tense, danger-filled moment. It occurred to him that Vardin had been wise in attempting to obtain a mount like Red Prince for tonight's work, for even after recovering the loot, the man would need a fast horse to make a getaway. The Masked Rider wondered if Vardin had succeeded in finding a horse somewhat as good as the Randall hunter.

Suddenly a jubilant exclamation came from the digger. The Masked Rider heard the words, "Hit something!" He saw the man with the shovel dig with renewed vigor, and the other two crowd close to the excavation. While they were thus distracted, the Masked Rider crossed to the shadows of the second building. He was now but fifty feet from the willow tree.

The digger, a short but thick-bodied man, threw aside his shovel. He dropped to his knees, reached into the hole, took a two-handed grip on what he'd unearthed. He lifted out a rather heavy object, laid it on the ground. He ripped aside rotting canvas, lifted from the remains of the tarpaulin a pair of saddlebags.

The Masked Rider heard the musical

jingle of gold coins.

The biggest man of the three grabbed the saddlebags from the digger. He chuckled with pleasure, and said, "Thirty thousand dollars in gold specie and currency. A profitable night's work, boys!"

An edgy voice—Jake DeLong's voice—said, "Let's get out of here. I've got a feeling that our luck's going to change."

Vardin, always foresighted, didn't trust the condition of the saddlebags that had been buried for the whole of two years. He wrapped them in a blanket, then tied the bundle securely to the saddle cantle of one of the horses. "All right, Jake," he said heartily. "We'll head out."

The Masked Rider said, "Don't mount that horse, Vardin!"

He had the advantage of surprise, after all.

The three men by the now empty cache stood as though suddenly turned to stone, and for a moment the Masked Rider was sure that he had the situation well in hand.

CHAPTER XII

Thunder in the Moonlight

IN THE shadows of the building, clad in black, the Robin Hood outlaw was not easily seen. The three startled men peered about, and it was evident that they believed that more than one man threatened them. Jake DeLong said nervously, "Soldiers! They've got us!"

Vardin wasn't so easily deceived. He must have remembered the rider who had come to the outlaw camp the night before to ask for Russ Vardin—the masked rider who had recovered the stolen Randall sorrel. He said tersely, "Keep your head, Jake! There're no soldiers here!" He lifted his voice, "You, Masked Rider! There's nobody here named Vardin!"

"You'll do until Vardin comes along then, mister," the Masked Rider retorted, and saw how Vardin faced toward his way. "I've got a bead on your heart, hombre, so don't try to run for it. Walk toward me with hands where I can see them—and bring your horse with you."

"What's the idea?"

"You and I have some business."

"I don't know you," Vardin said flatly. "You don't know me. We've got no business to discuss."

"Do as I say, hombre!"

"Well, all right. I'll humor you."

His sudden show of resignation made the Masker Rider suspicious. It was obvious that Vardin had hit upon some scheme to save himself. It might even be that the man had an inkling of why the Masked Rider was on his trail. If Vardin did guess that reason, he would know that the Robin Hood outlaw couldn't afford to kill him.

Dead, Russ Vardin would be worthless to the man trying to pin Mason's murder on him. Alert for a trick, the Masked Rider watched Vardin move to the horse onto which he had tied the bank loot. Vardin caught up the reins, took two forward steps, then abruptly whirled and swung to the saddle.

At the same time, he yelled, "Jake—Matt! Watch out! He'll kill us all! He's after the loot!"

The Masked Rider fired a shot that he hoped would frighten Vardin. But the man knew that this wasn't an attempt on his life. He swung his horse about, jabbed spurs to it, circled the willow tree. At the same time, Jake DeLong and the man called Matt, now aware of the Masked Rider's position, and in fear of their lives, grabbed out their guns and started a wild firing.

Slugs slammed into the plank wall behind the Masked Rider.

He had to shoot to kill now, to save himself.

HE MISSED his first two shots, for Jake DeLong, whom he tried to target, had whirled and darted for his mount. The burly Matt backed away slowly, firing with each backward step, a gun in each hand. The Masked Rider fired again, and Matt staggered. The hardcase didn't go down, however. He cursed savagely, swung both guns up, took careful aim. The Masked Rider dropped to the ground, fired again from a prone position as Matt's slugs whined above him. Now Matt fell forward, hitting the ground in a loose heap.

Jake DeLong was riding off, shooting

back as he went.

The Masked Rider let him go. He rose and sprinted toward the cottonwood clump, whistling a summons to Midnight. The stallion responded, came at a lope with his empty stirrups flying. The Masked Rider grabbed the reins, then he froze with alarm just as the other three had done a minute or two before.

For there was a heavy drumming of hoofs.

A bunch of riders, in a column of twos, loomed toward the moonlight. A voice shouted some sort of command. The Masked Rider saw the uniformed riders, a dozen of them, and the one civilian rider. The civilian was the detective, A. B. Smith, who the Masked Rider had believed was in no condition to ride into the Strip tonight.

Smith rode beside the young lieutenant, and now he yelled, "There's one of the crowd, Blakeson! There beyond those shacks!"

Smith had seen the black-clad outlaw.

Lingering no longer, the Masked Rider vaulted to the saddle and turned Midnight hard about. Again he was forced to outrun cavalrymen. This time he was not mistaken for a sooner. For Lieutenant Blakeson yelled, "It's the Masked Rider! After him, men! Get him—dead or alive! Lawmen everywhere will pay a reward for that bandit!"

There was a thunder of hoofs.

The Masked Rider looked back as he plunged in among the cottonwoods.

The cavalrymen were no longer riding in a column. They were spread out and riding hard, and carbines were being jerked from scabbards. The lieutenant was leveling his revolver. And the amazing Smith had also drawn a gun.

Shots began to racket.

Slugs ripped and tore through the foliage of the cottonwoods.

And while the Masked Rider rode for his life, Russ Vardin was making his getaway unhampered—with the thirty thousand dollars in loot!

LUCKILY, the black stallion had had a chance to catch its breath; and the cavalrymen had been traveling hard before reaching the cache. Once beyond the trees, the Masked Rider glanced back and saw that he was lengthening his lead. The troopers had stopped their wild shooting, sensibly enough, for a black-shrouded figure on a galloping horse was an almost impossible target for men firing from running mounts.

As the Masked Rider fled, he scanned the moonlit prairies for sight of Vardin and DeLong. But they seemed to have made good their escape. He saw nothing of them. When next he looked back, he saw that several of his pursuers were turning back toward the old ranch headquarters. No doubt Smith had grasped at the hope that he and the soldiers had arrived before the loot was dug up, and now was letting that hope take him back to the spot. Smith had done well. Not only had he made the trip in his weakened condition, but he'd also located the cache despite the loss of his map.

Five troopers were still in pursuit, but four were greatly outdistanced. One, better mounted than the others, was holding his own. He was still not within bullet range, and he was wasting no shots. When the Masked Rider glanced back again, his pursuers were still coming along—tenaciously. They were driving him west when he should be traveling south, the direction Vardin and Delong had doubtlessly taken. There was a risk in veering south, for the riders behind him could swing in at an angle, upon discerning his intention, and shorten his lead—perhaps disastrously for him.

There was a long swell of ground ahead, and the Masked Rider decided to take advantage of it. If he could outrace the cavalrymen, he might have better luck by using his wits. He shoved his rifle into its boot, and quickly tied Midnight's reins and looped them over the horn. He removed his mask, cape and sombrero, almost with one movement, and thrust them into the saddlebag.

The stallion was laboring up the rise now; it gained the crest, and as the Masked Rider had hoped, the opposite side was a steep, eroded bank. As Midnight made a sliding descent of the bank, about thirty feet in height, his rider dropped from the saddle. He slapped the horse across the rump, said, "Go it, boy!"

Clearing the bank, free to run loose, Midnight obeyed the command, as he'd been taught, and streaked away across the the flat prairie beyond.

Hoofs pounded up the east side of the swell. A uniformed man on a blowing horse reached the crest, urged his mount over and down the bank. He held his carbine in his right hand. He hadn't noticed that he was now chasing a riderless horse. Too late he saw a figure rise, seemingly out of nowhere, and leap at him. He was too startled to cry out. Powerful hands gripped him, tore him from his horse. A bronze-faced, black-haired man said, "Sorry, soldier," then hit him on the point of the chin, before he even spilled to the ground. His horse was caught by the same powerful hands, and jerked to a halt at the bottom of the bank.

The pounding of hoofs reached Wayne Morgan as he scrambled up the bank and began removing the unconscious soldier's hat and blouse. The other four troopers were climbing the rise as he donned that portion of the fallen soldier's uniform. He grabbed up the carbine, ran down to the blowing bay, and was buckling on the Army belt as the four appeared above only twenty feet away.

He faced the west, pointed with the carbine, and said, in a voice he tried to disguise with a sound of excitement. "He's just ahead! I took a spill. Keep going. You can get him!"

They hadn't stopped, and the noise of their descent helped Morgan with his deception. He turned to the bay and mounted, and then pretended to follow them. As they swept out across the flats, he turned due south and lifted his borrowed Army horse to a run.

He regretted what he'd done, out of sheer necessity, for it was such acts that had gained the Masked Rider the reputation for being an outlaw. But the Army would get its bay back, and the soldier. Well, Wayne Morgan knew that cavalrymen were tough. The fellow on the bank would come around without injury, and never be quite sure just what had befallen him.

Morgan headed south, searching now for Russ Vardin. The moonlit prairies were empty, as far as he could see.

NEXT ISSUE

THE KID FROM NOWHERE

A Story by DAVID X. MANNERS

CHAPTER XIII

Whole Hog for Justice

COLD despair touched Wayne Morgan, then took a firm hold upon him. He'd failed. His self-appointed mission was a fiasco. Russ Vardin had slipped through his fingers, and now was certainly on his way to parts unknown. A fugitive as cunning as Vardin would leave no trail for anyone to follow. The outlaw seemed to have no vulnerable side, no Achilles heel. He acted as boldly as he schemed. Had Vardin occupied himself with honest pursuits, Morgan was sure, he would have made his mark among respectable men. But greed, an uncontrollable desire to come by big money in a hurry, had driven him to steal and murder. There was no telling what evil Vardin would do if he were not soon apprehended.

But he had made good his escape, and Morgan had to admit it. There was no chance of finding the man by aimless searching.

Riding slowly through the night on the stolen cavalry mount, Wayne Morgan was disconsolate. He might have told himself that he had lost nothing. For that was very true. He was still alive and unharmed after his encounters with the outlaw, and he was free to go his adventurous way. But Morgan couldn't look at it in that fashion.

Ben Niles was still in that Texas jail, still awaiting the trial which would certainly send him to the gallows.

Morgan could not forget that.

He might seek out A. B. Smith and plead with him to start a manhunt for Vardin, but the detective had already refused to believe his—and Ben Niles's—claim that Russ Vardin was alive and the actual murderer of F. X. Mason. Smith had been seized and beaten by Vardin, yet failed to realize that his attacker was Vardin. His reasons were convincing—to himself. Russ Vardin was only a name to Smith and other men upholding the law—a name, and a man with a masked face.

That name could be an assumed one, merely an alias the man had used while

traveling with the now-defunct Maugher wild bunch, just as Vance Russell was probably an assumed name. Too, Smith had for a reason to disbelieve in Vardin's presence here the fact that the posse that had wiped out the Maugher crowd had reported that Vardin had fled wounded after the Harmon bank robbery—and, since he had not been heard of in two years, the outlaw was assumed dead of his wound.

No, there was no use in appealing to Smith.

The detective believed that only Ben Niles was present when Mason was killed, so—Niles was the murderer!

TOO, Morgan himself was suspected in the detective's eyes. The breath of suspicion touched any man friendly to Niles, according to Smith's way of thinking. The man actually believed that Vardin and his entire crowd were Niles' friends. And now, for what had happened at the cache, Smith must be convinced that the Masked Rider was a member of that crowd. It was possible that the detective was now accusing the Masked Rider of having made off with the bank loot!

It was past midnight when Morgan got back to the hideout camp in the rock hills. Blue Hawk was waiting for him, and he too had only a tale of misfortune to relate. The Yaqui somewhat sheepishly explained that he had run into trouble on his way to spy on the ranch where Russ Vardin had been stopping. After leaving Morgan, he had warily approached the ranch but—and Blue Hawk was ashamed of this—he had neglected to watch behind him.

Three riders coming to the ranch had sighted him from behind, and they had started shooting. Blue Hawk had been forced to flee, and when he returned to the ranch, after losing his pursuers, no one was there. He had tracked the Vardin bunch back to the crowd at the starting-line, where they had scattered and mingled with the homesteaders. He had not been able to find Vardin or DeLong.

"What of you, Senor?" the Yaqui asked. "Where is Midnight?"

Squatting by the fire, Wayne Morgan told his copper-skinned partner of his misfortune. Blue Hawk looked grave, and said, "I go to find Midnight." He started to rise, but Morgan shook his head.

"Midnight is like a wild mustang," he said. "He'll find his way here—unless the soldiers have captured him. If they've caught him, we'll steal him back."

Blue Hawk reluctantly gave in. He too loved the valiant stallion.

He asked, "What are your plans now, Senor?"

Morgan replied, "I've promised to help the Randalls stake a claim, so I'll make the Run tomorrow. After that I'll try to find out what Smith plans to do about the bank loot. If he gets some sense and starts hunting for Russ Vardin, I'll help him. If he doesn't go after Vardin, we'll return to Valido, Texas."

"And there, Senor?"

"I'm not going to let Ben Niles hang," Morgan said grimly. "If there's no other way to save him, I'll help him escape from jail—and get to Mexico. I don't like to do that, but I can't stand by and see an innocent man hang!"

THEY took to their blankets, then, to catch some much needed sleep. When they awoke at dawn, their first thoughts were of Midnight. The black stallion had not come in, and Blue Hawk said gloomily, "The soldiers captured him."

They rustled up breakfast, and, after eating, saddled the Army bay, Morgan's roan, and Blue Hawk's gray. The Yaqui said that he would take the bay to a place where the soldiers would find it, and he tied the stolen cavalryman's hat and blouse to its saddle. "Then I'll hunt for Midnight," he said. "The Yellowlegs will be busy today, so it won't be hard to find the stallion and take him away. You'll come back here, Senor, after the Run?"

"If I'm not here by dark tonight," Morgan said, "you come into the Strip. There is a place east of Skeleton Creek, an old ranch, that I'm going to stake as the Randall claim."

He gave Blue Hawk further directions, then rode out.

It was midmorning when Morgan reached the spot in the line held by the Randall family and Dick Larue. As far as the eye could reach, the line was jammed with men ready to start the race. Soldiers patrolled the north side of the line in great number, but Morgan did not see the short-tempered Lieutenant Blake-

son and was grateful for that. The atmosphere seemed electric. Tension gripped those thousands of waiting people. It would be a wild race, a great stampede of riders and all sorts of rigs.

The Randalls were relieved when Morgan rode up, and young Danny, the first to see him, let out a yelp. The blonde Tess was talking to Dick Larue, who held his pinto horse. Mrs. Randall had a table there beside the wagon, and was fixing sandwiches of biscuits and bacon. Henry Randall was seated on a low stool in the shade of his wagon, his hurt leg propped up on a hassock. He was smoking his pipe, but he didn't look as calm as he tried to appear.

"Glad to see you, Morgan," he said. "But I sure wish I didn't need you. I'd like to make the Run, myself."

"But you'll be coming along in the wagon," Wayne Morgan told him. "You'll be in the Run, even if you're not in the lead."

Randall merely grunted. He pointed to Red Prince. The sorrel was tied to the tailgate of the wagon, rigged with an English saddle. "Red's all ready for you, friend," Randall said.

"But not with that postage stamp saddle," Morgan said grinning. "I'll use my own Western hull." He hunkered down beside the bearded homesteader, took a knife from his pocket. He opened the blade and with its point began drawing a map in the dust. "Here's the spot I'm going to try for," he explained. "You'll head for where the Boggy meets Skeleton Creek, then turn east. The claim I want for you is five miles past the Skeleton—here."

"Why that spot, Morgan?"

"It has water and trees, and good red soil," Morgan said. "And a couple of rickety shacks that you folks can use until you build your own house and barn."

"How do you know?" Randall asked.

Morgan smiled again. "I get around," he said.

Dick Larue had come to listen and study the marks in the dust. "I know that spot," the cowboy said. "It's the headquarters of the old 77 Ranch. There'll be a lot of hombres heading for that claim, Morgan."

"Could be."

"You'll have trouble with claimjumpers, even if you get there first."

"I'll try to reason with them," Wayne Morgan said mildly.

These people didn't know that he had been born to trouble.

CHAPTER XIV

Sooner Than a "Sooner"

SUDDEN crashing of Army carbines set the greatest race in history underway. It was 12 Noon, September 16th, 1893, to the dot. The volley had no sooner sounded than thousands of riders and horse-drawn rigs leapt away. The scene here at the Hennessey section was being re-enacted at numerous other places along the boundaries of the Strip. Men shouted with wild exuberance, women cried out, children yelled. Dust roiled up in a tremendous cloud. Hoofs thundered. Whirling wheels ground out their own wild music.

Here the boomers were jammed together, all trying to gain the well-marked Chisholm Trail. It led to the townsite of Enid, the proposed county seat, and within the vicinity of the site would be the most desirable claims.

Wayne Morgan got off to a poor start. His thoroughbred mount was nervous, and became spooked by the sudden tumult. Red Prince began to buck like a mustang, and only Morgan's skill with horses kept him from being thrown. When he got the stallion under control, all but the big and clumsy wagons were streaming out ahead of him.

But Red began to run, and Morgan had no fear of losing the race—as others were already losing it. A buggy collided with a buckboard, and went toppling over. A wild rider swung to avoid hitting the wrecked buggy and slammed into the veering buckboard. Horse and rider went down. Morgan saw another horse stumble and somersault, throwing its rider hard. A spring wagon lost a wheel, and a sulky broke an axle as it hit a deep-rutted wash.

Morgan swept on, passing the rigs, and shortly only riders were ahead of him. About a hundred horsemen had a good

lead, and were steadily lengthening it. Morgan began to overtake them, one by one. The hunter who had been ridden to hounds in Old Virginia lengthened its stride, and not even the fleet Midnight could have done better. Soon there were but fifty riders ahead, then no more than forty.

Morgan came alongside a red-bearded man, began to pass him. The boomer swore, swung up a quirt. The whip slashed Morgan across the right arm, struck out again. He grabbed it and jerked with all his might, and the red-bearded man, caught with the loop of his quirt about his wrist, was dragged off his galloping horse. He spilled to the ground, losing out because of his viciousness.

Another rider just beyond tried to crowd Morgan into a deep gully, where a fall would mean grave injury or death, but the sorrel hurtled the ditch without difficulty. That same rider was thrown a minute later when his horse refused to jump another wash. Now there were only a score of riders ahead, and the one in the lead rode a pinto cowpony. It was young Dick Larue.

Morgan silently urged the Chickasaw Nation cowboy on. "Go it, partner!"

DICK was still in the lead, when, halfway to Enid, Morgan swung away from the trail and headed northeast toward the Skeleton. A mile or so from the trail, he glanced back. There was nobody following him.

He raced on alone, but checked the sorrel's speed to save the animal for a last-minute run if other riders overtook him. He rode easily over the undulating land, and for a brief moment was gripped by a feeling of regret. Without a doubt, Wayne Morgan alone of perhaps a hundred thousand land-seekers was riding to stake a claim for someone else.

He was young, and the urge to own land —to build a house, to put down roots, perhaps marry and raise a family—suddenly seemed a desirable thing. But it was not for such as he. It was not for a man who roamed the whole West with a strange and terrible restlessness. It was not for one who had dedicated his life to helping others. Morgan shook off his yearning mood, and rode on.

At the Skeleton, he reined in briefly to let the sorrel blow. He looked back and now saw riders coming in that same direction. Far behind them rose a vast dust cloud, showing the progress of the bulk of the stampeding thousands. Morgan put the sorrel across the creek, and now he had but a few more miles to go.

On the open prairies, a good sense of direction was required. Morgan was one of the few men who never lost his way, and now he headed straight toward the place where just last night he had been in grave danger—and had seen his mission end in failure. He saw the top of the old willow tree first, and watched it rise as he galloped toward it. Soon he saw the rickety buildings of the old 77 Ranch, and so far as he could see, no sooners had grabbed that portion of the Strip.

Minutes later he pounded up to the old buildings, and swung from the saddle. He walked the now-spent sorrel slowly about, after removing the saddle, so that it would cool gradually, and found the markers of the claim surrounding the ranch buildings. He had some difficulty locating them, for they were small cut sandstones jutting only six or eight inches from the ground and hidden by the grass. By the time he had found the fourth one and had the quarter-section's lines fixed, a rider on an almost fresh horse came pounding onto the claim.

The newcomer halted near the shacks, swung down, took a stake and a small ax from his saddlebag. He pounded the stake into the ground, spat, peered around defiantly. He was a burly man with a bristly growth of whiskers covering most of his face. He was armed with a six-gun, and he had a rifle on his saddle. He still hadn't seen Morgan, who was returning from the north end of the claim. But he suddenly sighted the saddle on the ground near the big willow tree.

He stiffened, shoved his ax into his saddlebag, patted his six-gun. He spat again, looked about belligerently. Morgan came past the nearest shack, still leading the sorrel.

"Get on your horse and move on, friend," he said, making an order of it. He wasn't inclined to be civil; the condition of the fellow's mount proved that he hadn't ridden far or fast, and that marked him as a sooner. "Get moving,

and don't start an argument."

"I was here first, mister."

"Before my saddle?"

"Dang your saddle," said the sooner, and went for his gun.

THE weapon was halfway from its holster when he saw that the tall man had him covered. By some wizardry, Morgan had drawn and cocked and levelled his own gun while the sooner was still reaching. But it was as much the chill look in Morgan's blue eyes as the gun he held that rattled the claim-jumper.

"Well—"

"You heard me," said Morgan. "Get on your horse and move on."

"Maybe I did make a little mistake."

"Be careful you don't make another—a fatal one."

The sooner left his gun fall back into its holster, and turned sheepishly toward his horse. He pulled himself to the saddle, looked about bleakly, then rode off. It was clear that he'd had his heart set on this particular claim, and had been willing enough to stake it dishonestly. Watching him cross the little creek and then lift his horse to a lope, Wayne Morgan smiled grimly. He told himself that it was fortunate that the wild-mannered Henry Randall, certainly no fighting man, hadn't had to face that hardcased sooner.

Ten minutes later another rider showed up. He came from the southwest, on a deadbeat horse, and he was no sooner. He too had his heart set on the claim Morgan was holding. It was evident that many of the boomers had made a private survey of the Strip some time previously to pick out choice locations. This rider was a shrewd looking sort in a black hat and a gray suit. Morgan was lounging in the shade of one of the shacks when the man rode up.

"Don't stop, mister," Morgan said. "I don't want company."

"You—!" The rider swore, in angry disappointment. "You couldn't have beaten me here. You must be a blamed sooner. Let's see your registration slip!"

"You got any authority to make such a demand?"

"I'll get the authority!"

"Yeah?"

"I'll bring a U. S. Marshal to run you out."

Morgan stepped out into the sunlight. He had his rifle in the crook of his arm. Again a man looked at him and saw the metallic chill in his blue eyes. "Go find a marshal," Morgan told him. "While you're wasting your time, all the best locations'll be grabbed up."

The rider saw the logic of that, and rode on.

There were other would-be claim jumpers during the afternoon, but all of them lost their nerve when faced by the chill-eyed Wayne Morgan. It wasn't long before all the surrounding sites were staked, The Cherokee Strip had been overrun, and the day of the Indian and cattleman had given way to that of the homesteader. *For better or worse,* Wayne Morgan thought. He could not know what only time would tell.

About five in the afternoon, he saw the Randall wagon approaching. Tess was driving the four horse team at a lively pace. Despite his hurt leg, Henry Randall was beside her on the seat. Mrs. Randall and Danny were inside, beneath the bowed canvas top. Morgan's roan trotted along behind, tied to the tailgate.

"You staked it!" Tess called. "You're a wonder, Mr. Morgan!"

"It's as good as you said, Morgan!" was Henry Randall's comment. "You have any trouble?"

"None that I couldn't handle," said Morgan.

He was glad for these people. They had a hundred and sixty acres of free land, of good land, and here they could start their lives afresh. He had helped them attain their goal, but down in Texas—this was in Morgan's mind—Ben Niles still languished behind bars, in the shadow of the gallows.

CHAPTER XV

Midnight Returns

NOW that the Randalls were sure of their claim being staked, the next step was to file on it—record the location in Henry Randall's name at the land office. That meant a trip to the townsite for the homesteader, and Tess offered to drive her dad there.

Provisions and cooking utensils were unloaded, for Mrs. Randall and Danny were to remain at the claim.

It was up to Wayne Morgan to stay and guard the site against claim jumpers, and he offered to remain until Tess and her father got back.

He gathered brush and wood, built a fire, after they'd driven off. Mrs. Randall busied herself with preparing supper for herself, Danny and Morgan. The boy was already scurrying about on an exploring expedition. The woman beamed on Wayne Morgan.

"You and the Masked Rider," she said sincerely. "I don't know what we'd have done without the two of you. We owe you, Wayne, more than we'll ever be able to pay you."

"Forget it, ma'am."

"Never," said Mrs. Randall.

It was a novel experience for the drifter, having a fine woman like Martha Randall taking a motherly interest in him. But her well meant questions made him uncomfortable. She tried to get him to talk about himself, asking where he was from and if his parents were living. She was curious about his not desiring to stake a claim for himself. Always when so questioned, Wayne Morgan had to refuse to answer or evade the truth. It was difficult to lie to Mrs. Randall, even to protect himself.

Finally she said, "I'm sorry, Wayne. I shouldn't be a busybody and pry into your affairs." She smiled at him. "I guess it's the mother instinct in me. And you don't look very happy. There's worry in your eyes."

There was. Morgan was worrying about the failure of his mission.

MRS. RANDALL put the coffee pot on the fire. "I guess Tess and Dick will get married when we're really settled here," she said. "They've only known each other a few days, but they're very much in love."

"Dick seems like a good sort, Mrs. Randall."

"Yes, he does."

"I hope everything works out for all of you," Morgan told her.

They ate by the fire, and afterwards Morgan told young Danny some stories. The boy said, "Tell me about the Masked Rider. Will you, huh?" Morgan did, telling of some of that mysterious figure's adventures—as though the Masked Rider were another man. Darkness came, and Morgan, still alert for claim jumpers, saddled up his roan and took a turn about the Randalls' quarter-section.

He could see campfires scattered over the prairies in every direction, marking other homestead claims. Once there came the crash of gunshots, and he guessed that someone had fired on a claim jumper.

Henry Randall and his daughter didn't get back until nearly midnight. They explained that they'd had to wait in a long line at the land office. But now the claim was safely filed. Morgan helped the lame homesteader down from the wagon, then began to unhitch the team. Tess came to him, and he saw worry upon her pretty face.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"While Dad was in the line, I went look-

[*Turn page*]

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ing for Dick," Tess told him, in a choked-up voice. "He's in trouble, Wayne. He was first to reach the townsite, and he staked that claim. But almost at once the claim jumpers came. Dick's claim is overrun with men, and there's nothing he can do to drive them off. They're dividing the claim—Dick's claim—into town lots. They offered Dick several lots, but he's demanding the entire quarter-section. They've organized against him, and they say they'll fight him in the courts. They want to put up buildings and lay out a town. They've already given it a name—Wellsboro."

"It was bound to happen. Dick grabbed the prize quarter-section of the whole Strip," Morgan said. "I'm afraid he wanted too much, Tess."

"Is there no way you could help him?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Maybe the Masked Rider," Tess said hopefully.

Morgan shook his head. "I know that the Masked Rider has troubles of his own," he told the girl. "He's busy trying to find a way to keep an innocent man from being hanged, down in Texas. At any rate, there doesn't seem to be any way to help Dick. He gambled for high stakes, and the odds were against him from the start. He'll see in time that he'll have to come to terms with those claim-jumpers—" Morgan smiled—"and be satisfied with a small part of what he dreamed of owning. Besides, he's still got you."

Tess blushed slightly, but she was disappointed.

She had hoped that Wayne Morgan or the Masked Rider might be able to perform some miracle.

After Henry Randall had eaten his late supper, he called Morgan over to where he sat by the fire. He held out two old and crumpled ten dollar bills that looked as though they'd been hoarded a long time, saved against a rainy day. Morgan didn't want to take any money for having made the Run, but he realized that it would make the Randalls wonder if he said that he didn't need any money. He took one of the bills.

"We agreed that you'd owe me only ten dollars," he said.

"Twenty is little enough," the homesteader said. "I owe you a lot more than that, more than I'll ever be able to pay."

But he saw that Morgan wouldn't accept the other bill. "I'd like you to stay on as my hired hand," he said. "If you'd like to for a time."

"I'd like to, but I've got to be riding."

"Right away? Tonight?"

Morgan nodded. "A friend of mine is coming by for me," he said. "I'll leave when—" He turned, peered through the darkness. He'd heard the sound of horses on the move. "Here he comes now."

BLUE HAWK was again posing as a blanket Indian. He had that old Army-issue blanket draped about him and wore the unshaped, feathered black sombrero upon his head. The Yaqui was leading the pinto pack horse and—yes, and Midnight. Wayne Morgan was grateful that Blue Hawk had recovered the black stallion.

But he had known that the Indian would find the horse as easily as he had found this place.

Randall looked surprised. "You sure have queer friends, Morgan," he said, chuckling.

Morgan went to meet Blue Hawk, but his first glance was for the black horse. Midnight seemed unharmed. He saw that the stallion's saddle was tied atop the pinto's pack.

He stepped over, opened the saddlebags, and the Masked Rider's attire was in them.

"The soldiers had the horse at one of their camps, Senor," Blue Hawk said, low-voiced. "They had the saddle inside the headquarters tent, to examine it closely. I had to wait until after dark to get the saddle."

"I'm grateful, *amigo*."

"I have news, Senor."

"Yes?"

"Smith was at the camp," Blue Hawk said. "He rode out with some soldiers at sundown. I think he is hunting the man who goes with the black horse and saddle." One of his fleeting smiles crossed his coppery face. "Now he has no man, horse or saddle." He sobered again. "There is more, Senor."

"Vardin?" Morgan said hopefully.

The Yaqui nodded. "Vardin didn't leave the Strip," he said. "I watched the Run start, and this bad hombre took part in it."

CHAPTER XVI

Blindman's Buff

FOR A MOMENT, Morgan couldn't believe it. But he knew that Blue Hawk wouldn't have made a mistake about anything so important. Morgan was jolted. He'd expected Vardin to run and to keep running until he'd put a couple States between himself and the Cherokee Strip, and in some faraway place take on some new identity. Again Wayne Morgan had to marvel at the man's cunning.

Vardin feared a manhunt.

He was aware that no matter how fast he traveled—by horse, stage or train—the telegraph could outrace him. A manhunt didn't just mean a posse following a dim trail, as in the old days; it was now a quickly spun web, with lawmen everywhere notified by wire that a fugitive was wanted. So, aware of that, Vardin hadn't run. He'd changed his appearance, no doubt, from a dapper and rather distinguished looking citizen into a seedy looking homesteader. And right now, he was probably guarding some quarter-section that he cared nothing about—and was feeling secure, laughing up his sleeve!

But for the eagle-eyed Yaqui, Morgan would never have known.

This put a different slant on things. Morgan could now remain in the Strip and seek out his man. It would take some doing, for the Strip covered a great deal of Territory and there were a hundred thousand homesteaders. But it seemed to Morgan that soon Vardin must slip up or that the outlaw's luck must change.

Blue Hawk grunted suddenly, "Senor—!"

He was listening intently into the night. He dismounted, dropped to his hands and knees, and put his ear to the ground. "Riders come," he said, rising. "Plenty of riders."

Morgan's hearing was keen, but as yet he heard nothing. He knew that this was another thing in which the Indian would not be mistaken.

He said, "Put Midnight into one of the shacks, *amigo*."

As Blue Hawk moved away with the three horses, Morgan heard the beat of hoofs in the distance. He returned to the fire where Henry Randall now sat smoking his pipe, his wife beside him, and the worried Tess was picking at a plate of food. Morgan took out makings and rolled a cigarette, hunkered down by the fire, and looked exactly like an ordinary cowhand. Across the way, Blue Hawk led Midnight into the shack farthest from the campfire. He came out and off-saddled his gray and the packhorse, working swiftly, and then faded into the shadows.

"I've decided to stay around a few days," Morgan said, looking at Tess. "Tomorrow I'll ride over and see if I can be of help to Dick."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" the girl exclaimed.

"That's a fine horse your Indian friend brought in," Henry Randall said. "Coal-black. The Masked Rider was riding a—say, there's somebody coming this way!"

He'd heard the oncoming riders.

Morgan was not surprised.

THERE were five troopers and a sergeant, and the pudgy Smith. They crossed the little creek, jogged over, reined in close to the campfire. Smith dismounted. His face still showed the bruises and cuts from the beating Vardin and DeLong had given him. The Randalls gazed at him in uncertainty, and regarded the soldiers nervously.

Smith removed his derby, mopped his battered face with a handkerchief. He smiled mirthlessly. "Well, well," he said. "It's my good friend, Mr. Morgan." He glanced at Mr. and Mrs. Randall and at Tess, then at the sleeping, blanket-wrapped figure of Danny. "You folks know this man?" he asked.

"Why, of course," Mrs. Randall said hastily, before Henry or Tess could speak. "He's our hired man, Wayne Morgan. He rode in the Run for us, and staked this claim."

"Thank you, madam," Smith said. It was apparent that he considered Mrs. Randall's word sufficient. He scowled at Morgan. "How come you staked this particular claim for these folks?"

"It's a good piece of land, Smith."

"How'd you know it was?"

"I rode for the 77 outfit when it was ranching here a couple years ago," Morgan replied. It was a time when the truth

would merely cause trouble, and the lie wouldn't injure the detective. "What's this all about, anyway?"

"As if you don't know," Smith sneered. He was in a bad humor. "Ben Niles told you that the bank loot was cached here. That's why you beat it yesterday, when I tried to question you. You took part in the Run, so you could come here. But all you found was an empty hole. A man was killed here last night, Morgan, after the loot was dug up. I found the body. Some soldiers with me identified the dead man as a killer from No Man's Land. He was killed by the hombre who got the loot, an outlaw called the Masked Rider."

Morgan looked surprised. "You caught him?"

"No, I didn't catch him," Smith retorted. "But I'll get him. I wouldn't be surprised but what he's a friend of yours —and Ben Niles's. There's only one thing that keeps me from placing you under arrest, Morgan. That's your having saved my life yesterday. Those two men would have killed me if you hadn't come along."

"You mean Russ Vardin and Jake DeLong?"

"You still trying to tell me that Vardin's alive?"

"Yeah," Morgan drawled. "And I think you believe it. You didn't come by here looking for me. You figured Vardin—the man who beat you up and stole your map —might have been in the Run and staked this claim, so that he could hunt for that loot. Right?"

"Well—"

"Sure," said Morgan, nodding. He puffed on his cigarette, smiled. The Randalls were all ears. "You know what I think, Smith? I think that Vardin and not the Masked Rider got the loot. I'm not saying the Masked Rider wasn't here last night. But I'd bet that Vardin got here first, dug up the loot, and got away."

"You'd lose the bet, friend."

"How so?"

"The man you called Vardin was in the Run. I saw him when I watched the stampede start. I tried to catch him, but he was too fast for me. If he had the loot, like you say, he'd be a hundred miles from the Cherokee Strip by now. The reason I'm hunting him is to pay him back for that beating he gave me—and to question him about that Masked Rider."

"Keep hunting him," Morgan said. "He killed your partner, Mason."

"That again!" Smith growled. "Look, Morgan; if you know anything about the Masked Rider, let me in on it. You string along with me, and I'll consider your story about somebody else than Ben Niles having killed Mason. Is it a deal?"

MORGAN shook his head, tossed his cigarette into the fire. He glanced at the Randalls and hoped that they wouldn't give him away—as he said, "I don't know anything about the Masked Rider, except what every cowboy in the West has heard of him. I've never seen him. But the man who beat you up is Russ Vardin, and Vardin killed Mason."

Smith looked disgusted.

Behind him, the still mounted sergeant growled, "Smith, this cowpoke knows plenty. My orders were to help you settle this business. I'm for arresting him. We've got the Masked Rider's horse and duds back at camp, and if we gather in the men who know him, we'll get him in time. Let's take this hombre, now. And pick up Vardin or whatever his name is, later."

Smith looked tempted.

Morgan was alarmed. He said, "I wouldn't try it, gents. There'll be shooting, and some of these folks might get hurt." He meant the Randalls, though he had no intention of shooting and endangering them even to save himself. Morgan was running a bluff. Then from behind him, in the shadows of the nearer shack, Blue Hawk said, "That's right, soldiers. There'll be shooting. I've got a rifle cocked and ready!"

Smith gave a start. "Who's that?"

The sergeant growled, "It's an Injun!"

Morgan rose, and drawled, "A friend of mine. He goes on the war path, easy. Smith, I did save your life. You know that the only thing I want out of this is to save Ben Niles from hanging. I want Vardin caught, and you can catch him. I give you my word I won't leave the Strip until you do."

Smith stared hard at him. "I'll take your word," he said abruptly.

He turned away, climbed clumsily onto his horse. "I'm assuming that Vardin is alive, from now on," he said. "When I get him, you'd better be where I can get hold

of you—or I'll start a manhunt for you. As for that Masked Rider. Well, I'm still hunting for him too!"

He turned away. The cavalrymen followed, the sergeant grumbling angrily. When they had disappeared through the darkness, Wayne Morgan turned to the three people by the fire.

"Thanks for not giving me away," he said. "If I'd admitted that I know the Masked Rider, they would have arrested me. Believe me, folks; the thing that brought me here is what brought the Masked Rider—a search for a killer. If we don't find him, an innocent man will be hanged."

"Your secret is safe with us," Henry Randall said firmly.

Both his wife and his daughter nodded agreement.

Blue Hawk came silently from the shadows. He'd put aside his blanket and hat, and now appeared the fine specimen of redman that he was. He waited for a sign from Morgan before he spoke. Then, out of some mysterious wisdom not shared by any white man, the Yaqui said, "Senor Smith is a man who walks blindfolded in the dark. He will not find the man you seek, Senor."

Morgan nodded. "Then it's up to us, *amigo*," he said.

He was far from sure that they could find Russ Vardin.

CHAPTER XVII

DeLong Delivers

JUST before sunup, and before the Randall family was awake, Morgan rode out. Blue Hawk was to start out after caring for the two horses, Midnight and the pinto, which they were leaving at the camp for the present. The two partners would search separately for Russ Vardin, each in his own way, and meet that night at the Randall homestead.

Morgan went west to the townsite, and the sun rose behind him as he viewed the transformation of the Cherokee Strip. Every quartersection was now occupied. Most of the settlers had come equipped for homesteading, and their first shelters were tents. At a number of claims, Morgan saw women and children. One homesteader was already putting plow to prairie sod. But the real change was at the townsite.

As yet there was only one building, the L-shaped plank structure housing the land office and the post office. Nearby it was an Army camp, far tidier than the tent town that had mushroomed up all around.

But the buildings would come. Some farsighted person had ordered lumber freighted in from Hennessey, and the big wagons were already being unloaded. The townsite quarter-section was crowded with men, and the land was being marked off in lots. No women and children had been settled here. These men were without families; they were the adventurers, the speculators, rather than homesteaders. They envisioned a town, and they meant to build it—and control it. They'd erected a big plank sign, crudely painted, that read:

WELLSBORO, THE METROPOLIS
OF THE CHEROKEE STRIP

Morgan estimated that three hundred men were settled upon the quarter-section. They were milling about in confusion, talking and laughing and arguing. Many had pitched tents. There was one enormous tent—almost as big as a circus tent that Wayne Morgan had once seen—and across its entrance was stretched a banner that read, in gaudy red letters, "The Tent Palace—Easy Ed Hanlon, prop."

Hanlon was already operating a saloon under canvas. The beefy, florid faced man was supervising the unloading of two big freight wagons. Tables and chairs were being carried inside. Whiskey kegs and beer barrels were being rolled in, and Morgan saw two freighters lift a roulette layout from one wagon. There was also a piano to be unloaded.

Morgan had some difficulty finding Dick Larue. He located the cowboy finally in the middle of the claim. Dick was seated dejectedly on his saddle. His pinto pony was staked out nearby. Morgan dismounted, laid a friendly hand on Dick's shoulder, and said, "Buck up, partner. You'll just have to make the best of a bad bargain. This was bound to happen."

Dick shook his head. "It's not fair," he said bitterly. "I got here first. It's my quarter-section. I asked those soldiers to run off these claim jumpers, but they claim they're just here to keep order for a few days. A man's got to protect his own claim. How can I do that? I could drive off one or two claim-jumpers, but not three hundred. I'll fight 'em in court!"

"What are you holding down now?" Morgan asked.

"Three town lots," Dick muttered. "Three measly lots out of a hundred and sixty acres!"

MORGAN told him, "They'll be worth a lot of money one day." But he saw that the Chickasaw Nation cowboy was disconsolate. Dick had been cheated, and he was bitter. He could not see that the portion of the claim left to him was valuable enough; a ranch hand who'd never owned a square-foot of land in his life, Dick had let his ambition to own the most valuable quarter-section in the Strip throw him.

"It would have happened to me," Morgan said, trying to reason with him. "Or to any man. Look, partner; men like you and me belong on the open range, not hemmed in by buildings—even if that would make us rich. Take my advice and make a deal with these claim jumpers. You could sell your three lots now, or hold them for sale when there's a real town—when the value of lots will be sky high. Then you can buy yourself a ranch, where you and Tess—"

Wisely, Morgan ended his argument on that.

Dick Larue was thoughtful. "Maybe you're right," he said slowly. "Tess did say that she wouldn't like living in a town." Suddenly he jumped up, staring beyond Morgan. "What's that now?" he growled.

One of the big lumber wagons had pulled onto Dick Larue's small strip of land. The driver reined in his six-mule team, and he and his helper prepared to unload the boards. Dick Larue shouted angrily, drawing his gun, but Morgan restrained him. "I'll handle this for you, Dick," he said.

He strode over to the freighters, demanded to know why they were unloading the lumber there. "Orders," the teamster said. "Easy Ed Hanlon bought this lumber, and he wants it unloaded here."

"Take it away, friend."

"What?"

"Hanlon made a mistake."

"Who says so?" the burly freighter sneered.

Then he took a good look at the tall man with the chill blue eyes, and he backed down. "All right, mister," he muttered. "But Hanlon won't like it."

"I'll have a talk with Mr. Hanlon," Morgan said.

He waited until the two climbed back onto the wagon and drove off toward Easy Ed Hanlon's tent saloon. Then he turned back to the worried Dick Larue. "You got any money, partner?" he asked.

"Not much. Just enough to keep me in grub."

"I'll loan you some. You write a letter to the general store in Hennessey and order enough barbwire to enclose your three lots," Morgan said. He took some bills from his levis and pressed them into Dick Larue's hand. "A fence will keep out trespassers, and make it easier for you to guard your land. I've a hunch that you better hold onto what you've got for a few months, then sell—for a big price."

Dick stared at the money in his hand, apparently wondering how a drifting cowhand like Wayne Morgan could afford to loan so much.

Morgan went back to his horse, mounted. He said, "I'll have a talk with Easy Ed Hanlon." He grinned. "Maybe I can talk him into using his influence to see that you're not molested again."

"Well, thanks," Dick said. "You'll sure do to ride the river with!"

"You get over to the post office and write that letter," Morgan told him, and rode toward Hanlon's tent saloon.

DESPITE the early hour, Hanlon's place had customers. The saloonkeeper had come to the Strip well prepared for starting a business. He'd even imported two carpenters, and they were busily and noisily building a long plank bar inside the great tent. It ran along the right side and was nearing completion. The beefy Hanlon was showing some employes that he'd also imported, where to set up the tables and gambling lay-outs. Six burly men, no doubt recruited from

among the claim jumpers, were wrestling the piano into the tent. A bartender was serving customers at the finished portion of the bar.

Recognition of Wayne Morgan showed in Hanlon's eyes, and he lost some of his blandness. He took a cigar from his pocket, gripped it between his teeth, talked around it.

"You're the cowpoke with the Indian friend," Hanlon said warily. "The hombre who wanted to know if I had a friend named Vardin."

"You've got a good memory, Hanlon," Morgan drawled. "Maybe you remember Vardin?"

"No."

"You call him Vance Russsell."

"Russell I know. But he's not here."

"Where is he, Hanlon?"

"How should I know?" Hanlon growled. "Now, look; I'm busy and—"

Morgan caught him roughly by the arm as he tried to turn away. He jerked Hanlon about, so that they faced each other again. Hanlon winced, and alarm showed in his eyes as he saw the rocky look on Morgan's face.

"You're making yourself a big man here," Morgan said. "I'm warning you not to get too big. You and the rest of these claim jumpers found Dick Larue an easy-mark. But I'm siding him now. I chased off that load of lumber you sent to his lots. I'm seeing to it that Dick strings barbwire around his land, until he's ready to sell out. If anything should happen to that cowboy, if he should lose those lots, I'll blame you, Hanlon. And—" he patted his gun—"I'll hold you responsible."

Sweat beaded Hanlon's face. He had trouble with his breathing.

He was not a cowardly man, but something about this tall drifter took the nerve out of him.

"All right," he muttered. "I'll see that Larue's not harmed."

"Stop shaking, Ed," said another voice—behind Wayne Morgan.

At the same instant a gun jabbed hard against Morgan's back.

The voice behind the gun went on, "I don't know who you are, mister. But you've been meddling in matters that are none of your business. You'll meddle no longer."

Morgan had gone rigid.

Now he slowly turned his head, and from the corner of his eye, he saw that the gun was held by the funereal looking Jake DeLong—Russ Vardin's partner!

CHAPTER XVIII

Faces of Death

HANLON yelped, "Don't, Jake! Not here! A shot'll bring the soldiers, and Captain Garson warned me to run an orderly place!" Always the businessman, Easy Ed Hanlon was frightened. His excited plea gave Morgan a slight hope that DeLong wouldn't pull the trigger just yet. And if there was a little time—Morgan forced himself to relax a trifle. Still looking over his shoulder, he saw that DeLong had discarded his dark, professional gambler's attire for the rough clothing of a homesteader. On his gaunt figure, a flannel shirt and blue overalls hung like a scarecrow's.

DeLong furthered the disguise by not having shaved, and his thin, pale face was bristly beneath his shapeless hat. He was rigged out in that manner, Morgan knew, in the hope of avoiding discovery by A. B. Smith, or by anyone else who might know that he had been with Russ Vardin when the bank loot was recovered. Morgan, testing the man, swayed away from the gun.

It didn't work.

DeLong jabbed hard, snarled, "Try something, mister! Just try!"

Hanlon said, almost whining, "Take him out of here!"

Everybody in the tent—the bartender, the customers, the carpenters, the employes—were watching. There wasn't a sound in the place now. Morgan looked around, but without hope. There was no one who would interfere to side a cowhand who'd got himself in trouble.

Morgan noticed that a strip of canvas rigged on poles formed a wall across the rear part of the tent. In the space beyond, Hanlon probably had his office, living quarters and stockroom. At the right end of the canvas wall was an opening, and a big man in homesteader attire—though not such rough clothes as DeLong had adopted—now appeared.

Morgan thought, *Vardin!*

There could be no mistaking the man—for Wayne Morgan, at least. There were other big men. This one too hadn't shaved. The rough clothing suggested that their wearer had never looked dapper or distinguished. But Russ Vardin had a certain air that marked him as somehow different from ordinary men, and no crude disguise could conceal it. His gaze met Morgan's, and the man scowled. No doubt he recognized the cowboy who had appeared at the cedar brake when Smith was being beaten.

Certainly he was wondering why the cowboy was here—with DeLong's gun at his back. He came forward, walking heavily as would a man such as he now pretended to be. He took a pipe from his pocket, clenched it between his teeth. He pushed back his shabby corduroy coat, hooked his thumbs in his galluses. He spoke in the fashion of a slow-witted farmer.

"What's going on here?"

"Recognize this hombre?" DeLong asked.

"Sure," said Vardin casually. "He's a friend of a friend of ours, a man named Smith. What's he done?"

"He was threatening Hanlon. And talking about a man named Vardin or Russell. He couldn't make up his mind what the name was."

VARDIN scowled again, gazing at Morgan. "Just who are you, mister?" he demanded. He took the pipe from his mouth, thrust it into his pocket. "You wouldn't be a certain night rider folks call the Masked Rider, would you?"

"My name's Morgan. I'm hired out to a man named Randall," Morgan said, hoping he could talk his way out of this. "Dick Larue knows me. Nope. I'm not the Masked Rider. That's plumb loco."

DeLong said, in a whisper, "He's bad medicine. Better get rid of him." His gun still pressed against Morgan's back.

Morgan saw Vardin nod.

He knew then that they would try to kill him, despite Hanlon's plea, and he decided to die fighting. He whipped around so fast that De Long was not only caught off guard but was thrown off balance by Morgan's hurtling body. DeLong's gun roared its shot, but harmlessly, and before he recovered and could swing the weapon about, Morgan's fist had crashed against his jaw. As the gambler collapsed, Morgan dropped his hands to his right hand gun. But he had not counted on Vardin moving so fast. Vardin had leapt forward. He clubbed down with a six-gun. Morgan's Stetson did little to cushion the blow. Pain exploded in his head, his brain reeled, his vision blurred. He felt his knees buckling, and the second blow, coming as he fell, sprawled him out on the ground.

He lay on the borderline between awareness and unconsciousness, his mind alternatingly engulfed by waves of unfeeling blackness and stabs of throbbing pain. He heard voices.

Hanlon's voice, "You'll ruin me! The soldiers—"

Vardin's voice, "Shut up, Ed! Mickey, you and the two boys with you get him out of here—fast. He's probably got a horse outside. Tie him on it. Take him to some lonely spot, and see that he doesn't come back. You savvy?"

Rough hands seized Wayne Morgan.

Another wave of blackness, a tidal wave this time, engulfed him.

THREE tough-visaged men dragged the helpless Morgan to the rear of the tent, behind the canvas partition, and there rolled him, so that he was covered completely, in an old tarpaulin. They bound the tarpaulin about him with ropes. Without conscious thought, the three toughs left an opening beyond Morgan's head and through it he managed to get air.

One left to fetch their own and Morgan's horse from out front of the tent. The other two picked up the heavy bundle and carried it through Hanlon's private rear entrance. When the horses came, the bundle was lifted onto the roan horse, draped across the saddle, and tied there. The three men mounted their horses, and the one called Mickey took up the roan's reins.

In broad daylight, they rode out and the hundreds of men they passed on the townsite claim seemed not at all suspicious—or even curious. They headed west, lifting their horses to an easy lope, and for a few miles they rode in silence. They were always crossing somebody's

homestead, always within sight of some settler or settler's family. Mile after mile, and there was no lonely spot. They approached a clump of blackjacks, but two homesteaders were there busy wielding axes. They came to a draw that was lonely enough, but when they entered it, two men—a father and son, with rifles across their saddles—came riding up fast, suspecting claim jumpers.

The three rode on, towing the burdened roan horse.

Finally one growled, "Where'll we dump him?"

Another muttered, "Yeah. We've got to get rid of him somewhere."

Mickey, the toughest of the trio, swore and said, "We'll head for the Cimarron and the Gyp Hills. The Hills are still Government Land, and there'll be no blamed homesteaders there."

"That's thirty miles from town!"

"Yeah, Mickey—"

"Listen; we'll get paid good for this," Mickey said sourly. "Now stop bellyaching. If you two have lost your nerve, turn back. I'll go it alone."

They fell silent.

They rode on, pushing their horses.

MORGAN was in agony during the hours it took to ride across the prairies toward the Cimarron River and the Gyp Hills. Riding in such a position, imprisoned in tightly bound canvas, would have been torture for an uninjured man. And Wayne Morgan was badly battered from those two blows upon the head.

His brain had cleared, and with consciousness came a torment of jarring pain. His skull felt split open, and his eyes ached. There seemed no end to the torture, and yet he well knew that when it ended, he would be murdered. Never in his life had he been in such grave danger.

At last, after fording the Cimarron, the riders halted. They were in low hills grown dense with cedar. They dismounted, cut the ropes lashing the bundle to the roan, and dumped it to the ground. They pulled the tarpaulin open, and the brassy sun hit Wayne Morgan in the eyes like a giant fist. He closed them tightly, then opened them again. He looked up at the three tough, vicious faces.

The lank, pock-marked face said, "Who is he, anyway?"

The swarthy, scarred face said, "Who cares?"

The heavy, sour-looking face belonging to Mickey growled, "Some trouble-maker." He eyed his helpless victim wickedly. "Looks like a cowhand, but you never can tell. Wonder if he's got any money on him?"

"Shoot him first, then take a look," said the pock-marked man.

Morgan tried to move his arms. They seemed paralyzed. He managed to move his right hand to its holster. The holster was empty. They'd taken his guns, of course, and, after being tied up so long, he was too stiff to make a sudden move and put up a fight with his bare hands.

Despair filled him.

CHAPTER XIX

Larue Comes Through

EVEN as he lay there and watched them, hate rose in him for the evil spawn that they were. They were arguing about who should fire the shot that would snuff out his life. They decided to draw straws, then decided not to, and they considered each firing a shot into him. Mickey went to his horse and took a bottle from its saddlebag. He uncorked it, and drank, then shared it with the others. They kept arguing, as cowardly as they were evil, and the bottle, a large one, grew more and more empty.

Time was passing.

And Wayne Morgan's circulation was slowly being restored. His weakness was leaving him, and soon he would be able to put up a fight. Yet he knew in his heart that it would be a hopeless fight. Bare fists had no chance against guns. Then Morgan realized that his roan horse stood ground-hitched behind him, and that his captors might have failed to take his saddle gun from its holster. He rolled over, moving warily, and saw that the Winchester was there—only ten feet away!

He went lax as one of the hardcases glanced his way. His head rested against the ground, and now, in that position, he heard, as Blue Hawk had heard last night

at the Randall claim, a beat of hoofs. A rider was approaching.

Morgan felt excitement sweep through him. He did not believe that this was help for him, but, if the rider came close, his three guards might be distracted long enough for Morgan to get hold of his rifle —and start shooting. Morgan listened intently, his ear close to the ground, and the steady drumming of a running horse was louder now. A moment later one of the men heard it.

"Somebody coming!"

The three looked startled.

Morgan tensed his muscles, ready to spring up, and then a rider circled a cedar thicket. It was a man on a pinto cowpony—Dick Larue! He was riding with his rifle across his saddle, and now, catching sight of Morgan and his captors, the cowboy slowed his horse to a walk. The hardcases grabbed out their guns. Their backs were toward Morgan now. He leapt up, lunged toward his horse.

A savage howl rang out.

Morgan grabbed the rifle from its boot, levered a cartridge into the firing chamber as he swung around. He swung the 30-30 to his shoulder as he dropped down onto one knee in shooting position. One of the gunmen had witnessed Morgan's move, and had shouted that warning. Now all three swung around. But they were startled by finding themselves face to face with Morgan armed and ready while a hostile-looking rider came up behind them. They started shooting, but fear was in them. Rattled, their shooting was wild. Morgan's rifle cracked as an echo to the first wild shot. And Dick Larue then opened up.

It was over in one wild moment, with two dead men on the ground and a third man, creased along the ribs by a slug, holding empty hands high in surrender. The surviving tough was the dark, scar-faced man. His eyes were full of terror, and he pleaded for his life like a beggar.

Dick Larue rode up. "You all right, Morgan?"

"Yes. Thanks to you, Dick."

MORGAN found his own six-guns in the saddlebag on one of the horses, and he returned them to his holsters. He found his Stetson stuffed into the saddlebag on his own horse. He reshaped it, put it on his still aching head, then mounted the roan. He laid his chill gaze on the dark-faced man.

"Get out of the Strip," he said flatly. "If I run into you again, I'll let you go for your gun and then kill you. You savvy?"

He caught the man's jerky nod, then turned away with Dick Larue. They rode toward the Cimarron, and Morgan asked, "How'd you know, Dick?"

"I was on my way to the post office to write that letter," the cowboy explained. "I saw those three hombres riding out with a roan horse that looked like yours. I saw something tied on the roan. I went on to the post office, but I got to worrying. So I started trailing them."

"And showed up just in time."

"I would've sure felt bad if they'd killed you. On my account."

"It wasn't because I told Hanlon to keep off your land," Morgan said. "Hanlon took my warning to heart. There were some other hombres there that have it in for me. One of them was the man who got those toughs to steal Red Prince the other night, a man who sometimes goes by the name Russ Vardin. The other was a tinhorn gambler, Jake DeLong. They got the jump on me."

"What have they got against you?" Dick wanted to know.

Morgan explained his mission to save Ben Niles from the gallows.

"So you've got to catch this Russ Vardin and force him to confess that he murdered the detective," Dick said. "Well, I'll give you a hand with that, too."

Morgan shook his head. "You've taken enough risk for me," he said. "I'm going to get help from a man who devotes his life to helping people in trouble. He'll finish this when I tell him where Vardin is hiding."

"You mean the Masked Rider?"

"Yes."

Dick Larue nodded. "Maybe Vardin will be gone by the time the Masked Rider shows up here," he said. "He may have been scared off."

Morgan shook his head. "No reason for him to be scared off," he reasoned. "I wouldn't have discovered him if his partner, DeLong, hadn't overplayed his hand. Now that Vardin thinks that his men have taken care of me, he'll feel secure. He has

nobody to watch out for now except Smith, and that detective is a city man who's out of his element here in the West. Vardin is too shrewd to fear A. B. Smith."

"Well, if you and the Masked Rider need help—"

Morgan nodded, gave Dick Larue a friendly smile.

There was one reward for helping decent people. They appreciated it, and always wanted to repay their benefactor.

MORGAN and his companion had supper with a friendly homesteader family whose quarter-section was located about ten miles from the townsite. They rode on through the gathering dusk, and full dark had come by the time they reached the tent-town called Wellsboro. Morgan told Dick Larue that they would part before entering the town, explaining, "I don't want Vardin or any of his crowd to see me."

"Sure you don't need my help?" the cowboy asked.

"You can do one thing for me," Morgan replied. "You can try to locate A. B. Smith for me." He described the detective. "You'll probably find him at the Army camp. Tell him that Wayne Morgan says to stand by tonight, that I may be able to lead him to Russ Vardin and the bank loot."

Dick nodded. "I'll give him your message."

"Tell him too," Morgan added, "that he'll probably need some soldiers to side him—when the word comes."

They parted, and Morgan skirted the town.

He headed for the Randall homestead, traveling now at a lope. He forded the Skeleton, pushed on, and soon saw the Randall's campfire. Blue Hawk was there, just having returned from a fruitless search for Vardin. Morgan said, after the Yaqui reported his lack of success, "It's all right. I know where he is. Tonight—" he lowered his voice—"the Masked Rider is going to grab him."

Mrs. Randall called, "Wayne, I've kept supper waiting for you and your friend."

Tess was waiting for word of Dick Larue, and Morgan told her that the cowboy had decided to hold onto his three lots and sell them when the value of land in the townsite reached its peak. "Then he'll probably buy a little ranch somewhere," he said, smiling.

The girl was pleased.

Morgan and Blue Hawk ate by the fire, then the Indian went to get their outfit together. It was now up to Wayne Morgan to tell the Randalls that he was leaving for good, and it was difficult for him. He liked these people. He was fond of young Danny.

He said, "Henry, I'm sorry that I won't be able to stay and help you turn your quarter-section into a farm. But I have no choice. I've got to leave the Strip."

Randall frowned, worried his beard. "But why—?"

His wife touched his arm. Her woman's intuition told her that Wayne Morgan was no ordinary drifter, that he had more important plans than hiring out as a farmhand. "We understand, Wayne," she said. "But if you can ever come back, we'll welcome you like—yes, like a son."

Shortly, Morgan and Blue Hawk rode out. The Yaqui was leading Midnight and the pinto pack horse. The Randalls called their good-byes after the two until the darkness hid them. Morgan was in a solemn mood. He envied the Randall family and Dick Larue the peace and prosperity they would realize here in the Cherokee Strip, in that he wished that he could share it. Tonight he would don his black attire, and, as the Masked Rider, face grave danger.

It would be less risky if he could merely shoot it out with Russ Vardin. But he had to take the outlaw alive. And Vardin, with gunfighters at his beck and call, would certainly be on guard against any attempt to take him prisoner.

CHAPTER XX

End of a Promise

FINALLY they found a brush-grown draw about half a mile from the townsite, and waited there through the early part of the night. Their hiding-place was well away from the tent of the claim's owner, so Morgan and his Yaqui partner feared no discovery. Morgan donned his black sombrero, his domino mask, his long cape,

his black gun-rig. His flat-crowned gray Stetson and his plain tan cartridge belts and holsters he stowed away in Midnight's saddlebags. There was no telling; he might need to make a quick change back into a harmless looking cowhand before the night was done. They waited until midnight and longer.

The Masked Rider wanted the night's crowd at the Tent Palace to thin out before he went there. He wanted most of the tent-town's population to have done their drinking and gambling, and to have returned to their separate camps to bed down and sleep.

When finally he and the Yaqui rode from the draw in the small hours, a hush had come to the rowdy, newborn community. Scattered campfires, one of them Dick Larue's no doubt, were still bright patches in the darkness. A drunken voice muttered somewhere. Several staggering figures could be seen.

The two riders, traveling slowly and warily, were but two shadowy figures, themselves, and their passage aroused no suspicion.

Lamplight glared from the wide front entrance of Hanlon's huge canvas saloon; it leaked from beneath the tent walls. Tinny piano music sounded, and a few rowdy voices. A rider loped away, some homesteader heading for his claim, his mount's hoofs drumming.

The Masked Rider and his companion avoided the tent's front entrance. They circled to the rear and dismounted. The Yaqui remained to keep watch. The black-clad man searched along the wall, located the small rear opening. The flap was tied down, securely, to posts on the inside. The Masked Rider took a knife from his pocket, its blade razor sharp. He stepped through the seven-foot vertical cut, into the tent's small back room that was furnished rather comfortably as a bedroom at one end and as an office at the other.

A lamp upon the rolltop desk cast a yellow glow through the room. A cigar still smoking lay upon the edge of the desk, its burning end outward. An account book lay open there, with pen and inkwell beside it. A businessman, Hanlon. He'd be back in a moment. The Masked Rider stepped to the canvas partition; there was already a peep-hole in it, close to the desk, and he made use of it.

The peep-hole gave him a full view of the saloon proper.

A dozen men were still drinking at the long plank bar. That many more occupied tables. Hanlon was behind the bar, talking to a bartender. The piano-player called it a day, closing his instrument. Five men, two of them familiar to the Masked Rider, were sitting at one table in a poker game.

Hanlon came from the bar, carrying the till.

EASY Ed Hanlon came in, dropped the curtain-flap at the end of the partition-canvas. He put the wooden box, filled with currency and specie, upon the desk. He rubbed his hands together, his florid face smiling, then picked up his cigar.

"A good night, Hanlon?"

"Huh?"

The beefy saloonman swung about, stared at the masked figure moving toward him from his own sleeping quarters with a leveled gun in his right hand. The cigar fell from his mouth to the ground, unnoticed.

"One sound and I shoot," the masked man warned, his voice low—very low—but deadly. "Want to save that money in your till?"

Hanlon, the businessman, nodded eagerly.

The money, not his life, that was his concern—as the Masked Rider well knew. "Do as I say, and I'll let you keep it," the Masked Rider said. "Trick me, and I take it with me."

Again Hanlon nodded, relief replacing his alarm.

The grim visitor said, "Go out there. Tell Vardin—or Russell, as you call him—that Mickey wants him back here. Tell him that Mickey says, 'Something happened.' You savvy, Hanlon? Make it sound good. And no tricks. I'll be watching through that peep-hole."

Hanlon cast a worried look at his money box, then went out to the barroom. The Masked Rider watched from the peep-hole. Easy Ed Hanlon—the man lived up to his name. He walked casually to the poker table, spoke briefly to Russ Vardin, who was still in his homesteader clothes, and started back. Vardin spoke to one of the other card players, however, and that one, Jake DeLong, threw down his

hand and rose to follow Hanlon. The Masked Rider frowned with disappointment.

He said angrily, as Hanlon returned, "Sit down. Count your filthy money. Keep out of it."

Hanlon was no sooner seated than Jake DeLong, still a scarecrow in his shabby homesteader clothes, came in. The gambler's bony face was always pale; now it turned ashen gray. He tried to cry out, but only a strangling sound escaped him. He lifted his empty hands, and they were trembling. He got words out. "The Masked Rider?"

The question went unanswered.

One was shot at him, in a deadly tone, "Want to stay alive, Jake? Sure; I know. You'll do anything to live." The Masked Rider's .45 was aimed at DeLong's narrow chest. "Take out your gun and drop it, Jake." He waited until that was done. Then ordered, "Now walk out back, through that cut in the canvas. Move fast, and I'll let you live!"

DeLong moved on shaky legs. He found the slit and disappeared. From outside came another of the gambler's strangling sounds. Then Blue Hawk called softly, "All right, Senor."

The Masked Rider said flatly, "Another try, Hanlon. Get Vardin back here!"

The saloon keeper went reluctantly, mopping sweat from his face, and again a chill blue eye watched him from the peephole. Hanlon spoke to Vardin; Vardin shook his head, scowled. Hanlon caught him by the arm; Vardin said something, cursed perhaps, flung down his cards, jumped up. Hanlon tried to lead him away from the table; Vardin struck out viciously, knocking Hanlon down. Vardin shouted and some of the other men, seven of them, came from the bar or from the tables. Vardin gave them orders, and they drew their guns. They started toward the rear of the tent, warily. Vardin stayed behind.

The Masked Rider turned, ducked outside.

VARDIN had outwitted him again, and his disappointment was a bitter thing. He told Blue Hawk, "Take DeLong to the Army camp, *amigo*. Turn him over to the detective, if he's there. Tell Smith that Morgan sent you. Tell him to make DeLong talk. Get going. There's trouble!"

Gun in hand, he faced the slit while the Yaqui forced DeLong to mount the gray and swung up behind him. Vardin's gunmen were slow in making their appearance. They were in the office now, finding nothing and afraid to search farther. Vardin hadn't come to goad them on.

Vardin was staying where it was safe.

Where he *thought* it was safe.

As the gray loped away through the darkness with its double burden, the Masked Rider mounted his black. As he swung, in the opposite direction from which Blue Hawk had taken, a hardcase appeared at the slit in the tent wall. The man yelled and his gun roared. The Masked Rider twisted in the saddle and fired back at him, then Midnight carried him around the side of the big tent.

The black-shrouded figure rode directly to the front entrance, turned through it. His sudden appearance caught Russ Vardin and the score of other men there facing the rear of the wide room, their attention riveted in that direction by the shots that had crashed a moment ago. They came whirling about now, startled. A man yelled, "The Masked Rider!"

The Masked Rider's gun stared Vardin in the eye.

Shock showed upon the outlaw's face, but again he proved himself superior to ordinary men. He didn't go for his gun. Russ Vardin lifted empty hands shoulder high, and said flatly, "All right; you've got me. What do you want?"

"Walk out ahead of me," the Masked Rider ordered.

"Suppose I won't?"

"I'll drag you out, Vardin!"

"And while you're doing it," Vardin said, grinning wickedly, "my friends will drill you full of holes. You're done for, hombre. Your career's come to an end." He was sure of himself, seemingly without fear. He lifted his voice. "Boys, there's a dozen rewards offered for this hombre—dead or alive. I'll add another. A thousand dollars to the man who guns him down!"

Alarm knifed through the black-clad rider.

He kneed his mount forward, and struck down with his six-gun. The barrel caught Vardin on the right temple, hard enough to drop him to his knees. The gun jerked

up again, swung from side to side.

"I can take some of you with me, hombres!" he warned.

"No shooting!" It was Easy Ed Hanlon's voice. The bulky saloonman was on his feet again, a gun in his hand. "No shooting in my place!" he yelled. "I don't want the soldiers coming here!" He called to his bartenders to help him enforce that order, and they brought shotguns from beneath the bar.

The Masked Rider said, "You won't regret this, Hanlon."

He holstered his gun, took the lariat off his saddle, dropped the loop about the dazed Vardin. Like a cowpony dragging a steer to the branding fire, Midnight dragged the prisoner from the tent. Outside, the Masked Rider dismounted and hauled Vardin to his feet. He found a holstered gun beneath the man's corduroy coat, and tossed it away. He removed the rope, said flatly, "Mount up, Vardin!"

THE outlaw was swaying drunkenly. He moved unsteadily toward Midnight. The Masked Rider stayed close behind him, intending to mount behind him. He sensed that Vardin was feigning weakness, so jabbed him with his gun. "Climb up!" he ordered.

Vardin mounted, then jabbed an elbow into the Masked Rider's face as he tried to mount. The blow knocked the man in the domino mask to the ground, and before he regained his feet bedlam had broken loose.

The men who had been hunting the Masked Rider around back came running from both sides of the tent. Vardin had pulled a sneak gun from his coat pocket. A drumming of hoofs sounded not far off.

The night was suddenly crashing with shots.

Vardin's gun was blazing.

All that saved the Masked Rider's life was Midnight's bucking to unseat a strange rider, which ruined Vardin's aim. He didn't fire at Vardin, who must live to save Ben Niles from the gallows; but, with both guns drawn now, the Masked Rider was battling the gunmen closing in on him. He was a fast moving figure, darting one way and another, circling the bucking black stallion, a difficult target. Slugs ripped his cape, but got no closer. A man fell under his guns, a second screamed as a slug found him. Vardin was still trying to draw a bead on the Masked Rider as he fought the maddened stallion.

The odds were too great, however, and the man in the domino mask felt despair in his heart. Then, as two men got behind him, the drumming of hoofs was loud and close. Uniformed riders loomed through the darkness.

A civilian in a round hat rode with the soldiers—Smith. Now, at long last, Russ Vardin's iron nerves cracked. He fired on the cavalrymen. And his gunmen followed his example. It was sheer madness. A voice—Lieutenant Blakeson's—barked an order. Carbines crashed. Russ Vardin was knocked from the saddle, dead before he hit the ground.

The man in the domino mask almost groaned with his despair.

Vardin dead! Ben Niles' last chance gone!

Blakeson yelled, "Get that masked man!"

NO MAN'S luck could be wholly bad or wholly good. The Masked Rider had lost his means of saving Ben Niles, but he managed to save himself. He leapt onto the black stallion's back and started his wild flight. His sudden move spoiled the trooper's aim, and then he was an obscure shadow in the darkness. They came after him, but now, with a stroke of luck, men came running from all over the townsite claim—drawn to the excitement as men always were. They ran between the soldiers and their quarry, and the troopers had to slow their mounts to keep from running those men down.

As the Masked Rider drew away, Blue Hawk appeared and swung alongside. They rode like Comanches, and the dark night was a part of their good luck. Soon there were no riders behind them, and they changed their course. They headed for the draw where they'd left their outfit, and on the way the Masked Rider removed his black attire.

"DeLong?" he asked.

"Senor Smith placed him under arrest," Blue Hawk said. "He heard the first two shots at the tent, Senor, and he started out with the soldiers. He was waiting for something to happen. He said that he'd

had a message from Wayne Morgan. It is all settled now?"

"Nothing is settled, *amigo*."

"No?"

"The soldiers killed Russ Vardin," Wayne Morgan said heavily.

Sunup found an Indian rider trailing south beyond the Cherokee Strip into Old Oklahoma. He was heading toward Texas with a fine spare horse on a halter rope, a black stallion, and a pinto under pack.

Sunup found a rider who looked like a drifting cowhand approaching the L-shaped plank building housing the post office and land office. Apparently he had come neither to mail a letter or inquire if there was, by any chance, a homestead not filed upon, for he dismounted and, cowboy fashion, hunkered down against the wall and rolled a cigarette.

His bronzed face beneath his gray Stetson was grave, worried.

He watched the nearby row of Army tents.

After a time a pudgy little man in a rumpled black suit and a derby hat came from the headquarters tent and strode toward the plank building. He looked out of place here on the prairies, just as the cowboy would have looked out of place on city streets. He saw the roan horse and its owner, and he crossed to him.

"Hello, Morgan."

"Howdy, Mr. Smith."

"What's on your mind today?"

"Trouble. I'll be on my way back to Texas now."

"To try some other way of saving Ben Niles from the gallows?"

Morgan said, "A man makes a promise, he's got to keep it."

Smith said, "If Lieutenant Blakeson sees you here, you won't get back to Texas. He thinks you were one of the tough crowd that was busted up last night. A witness saw an Indian steal the Masked Rider's horse from Blakeson's old camp down across the line. You've been seen in company with an Indian. Blakeson thinks that you can lead him to the Masked Rider. He wants that outlaw—bad."

"Thanks for the warning."

"You're welcome."

Smith took out a cigar, lighted it. He began to smile. "Cheer up, friend," he said. "Ben Niles isn't going to hang. Jake DeLong talked. He admitted that his partner was Russ Vardin. DeLong was staking Vardin all the time he searched for Niles. He hoped to get a cut of the bank loot. He went to Valido, Texas, with Vardin. He stayed in the town while Vardin rode out to Niles's ranch, but Vardin told him what happened there that night. Vardin killed Mason after overhearing Mason and Niles discussing our plans. Vardin and DeLong followed me up here."

Morgan flung away his cigarette, rose, and he was grinning.

He mounted his roan horse. He looked down at Smith, still smiling.

The detective said, "I got the loot, and it'll be returned to the bank. DeLong took me to where he and Vardin hid it. It'll be prison for DeLong, and a nice reward for me. But I'm not selfish. I wouldn't have closed this case without the help of three good men—you, that Indian and the Masked Rider. I'd like to split the reward four ways, friend."

His eyes were amused. Smith suspected that Morgan and the Masked Rider were one.

Wayne Morgan said, his own eyes amused, "I can't speak for the Masked Rider, but the Indian and I have our reward—in saving Ben Niles. S'long, *amigo*."

He lifted his hand in a debonair salute, and rode off south.

The detective stood there looking after him until he disappeared over the rise south of the townsite, and uncertainty replaced the amusement in his eyes. Smith seemed to be asking himself, *Is he the Masked Rider, or just a drifting cowhand?*

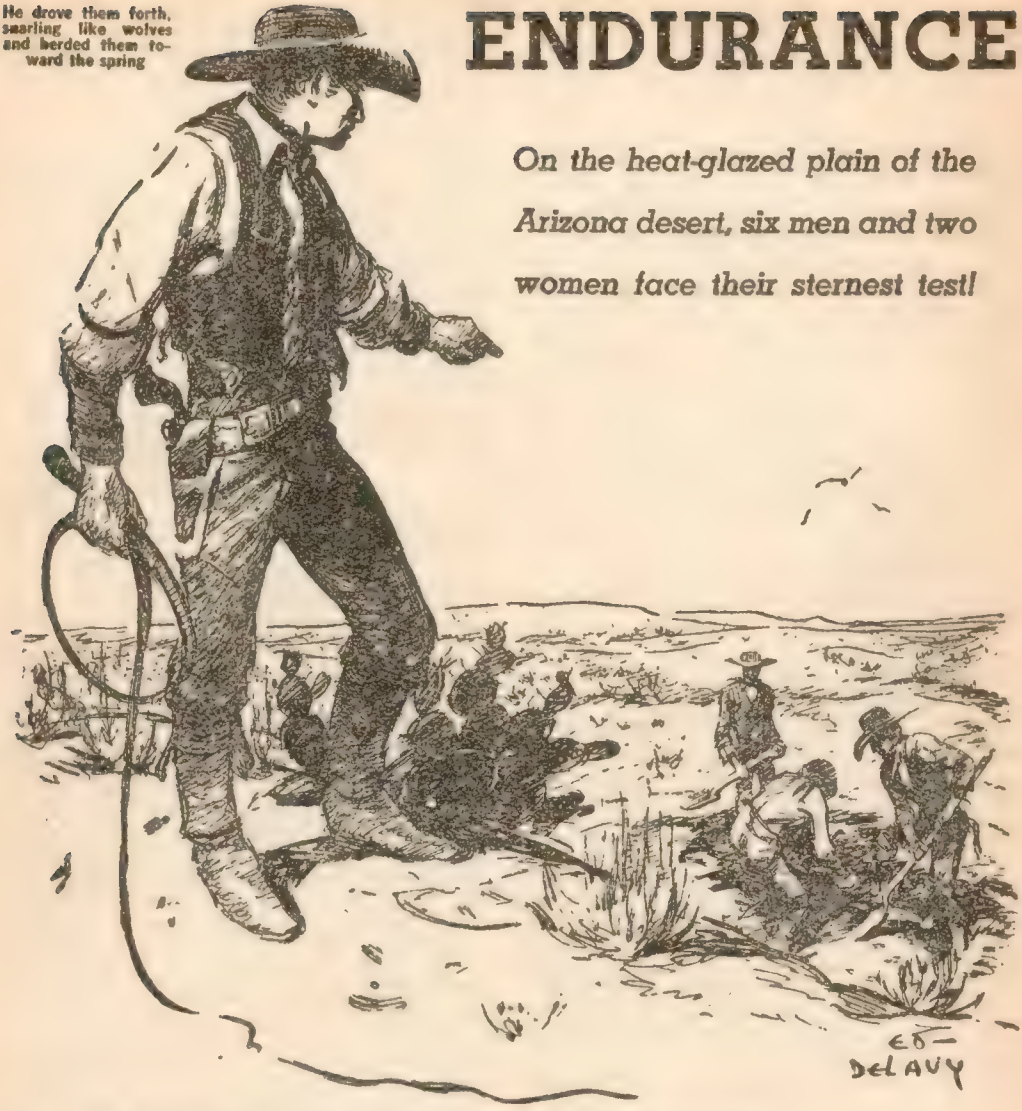
He would never know.

NEXT ISSUE'S WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

TRIGGERS ON THE YELLOWWATER by T. W. FORD

ENDURANCE

On the heat-glazed plain of the Arizona desert, six men and two women face their sternest test!



He drove them forth, snarling like wolves and herded them toward the spring

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

THE near ox stopped suddenly, surveyed the burnt landscape with filmed and bloodshot eyes and then slowly settled to earth, dragging its yokemate down with it. The second wagon creaked to a stop and the men came forward.

Pete Minks, the hired bullwhacker and a seasoned desert guide, sopped the sweat from his face and bent to inspect the fallen ox. He straightened up, gazed across the desolate flats of rock and sand to the chain of distant mountains on the horizon and shook his head.

"We won't make it. Better head back for Limestone Springs."

On every side stretched the Arizona desert, an endless barren plain scoured by stifling hot winds and burned by the dazzling glare of a brass-yellow sun. The

land was like an immense oven open to the sky. The waste seemed alien to all life. The only thing that moved, in fact, was not a creature of the sands: It was a great black vulture which swung and floated far up in the bowl of sky almost directly above the two motionless Conestoga wagons.

The men gathered about the dying ox searched one another's faces uneasily, but for the moment no one spoke. The two women huddled together above the tongue of the first wagon, the younger murmuring low words of reassurance to the older.

Pete Minks prodded the ox with the toe of his boot, drew a Colt's revolver and knelt down. A shot cracked out and he stood up, glancing at the men. "Get that yoke off."

He walked to the second wagon, unhitched the saddle horse tied behind and led it toward the front. While the others unyoked the carcass of the ox, he moistened his neckerchief and carefully swabbed the mouth and nostrils of the horse.

The men gathered again, anxious and uncertain. Two months ago, fresh from a Missouri steamboat, the six of them had been untested headstrong greenhorns. They were still largely untested but not nearly so headstrong. They had learned to respect experience—and Pete Minks, if anything, was an embodiment of that.

His eyes swept them and his face was grim. He had advised them, in the beginning, to take the longer but safer upland route and he had finally agreed to lead them across the burnt plains only against his better judgment. Even then, of course, he had assumed that Limestone Springs held water. Instead of a pool of life-giving water, however, the party had found only the dusty dried-out socket of a spring.

He spoke quietly, for they were all aware of the seriousness of the situation.

"Only one thing to do," he said. "Hitch that ox to the other yoke and head back for Limestone Springs. Pile what you need most in one wagon. Take all the shovels. When you get there, dig! It's the best chance you got. I'll aim south and maybe I'll hit something. There's a Papago camp down there somewhere."

The men considered this and appeared to see wisdom in it—all but one. Big Russ Shelvington glanced about uneasily and distrust darkened his features. "You're pullin' out with the only horse we got," he growled.

Pete Minks' sage-gray eyes hardened. "Another time, I reckon I wouldn't like that. There's the horse, Russ, if you want it. Go ahead."

Russ looked at the bony animal and then shifted his gaze to the shimmering horizon and said nothing.

"Russ!" The younger woman called out from the wagon. The men turned and gazed toward her momentarily, marvelling a little perhaps, at the difference between big Russ Shelvington and Lois Kent.

Another of the men spoke up. "Pete knows the desert better than we do, Russ. He'll get through if anyone can. We'd get lost, probably right off."

Russ scraped at the sand with his shoe and remained silent.

Pete continued. "When I 'greed to guide this outfit, I said I'd give the orders. I'm leavin' now and I'm namin' a new boss. Get your guns, all of 'em!"

Wonderingly, the men obeyed. Most of them carried muzzle-loading mountain rifles and one or more of the new Colt's revolvers. A little bewildered, they scrambled through the wagons and straggled back carrying their weapons.

Pete's eyes ranged the men. He nodded. "All right. Stack those guns!"

After pondering a moment, he picked a filled cartridge belt and a revolver from the heap on the sand. "Frank!"

The man addressed stepped forward. He it was who had spoken when Russ had objected to the loss of the horse. He was inches shorter than the big man, but muscular and solidly built, and his strong square face held quiet deliberation.

Pete handed him the belt and gun. "You're chief, Frank. You won't need these, but hitch 'em on. Lock the rest of these in that big chest in the wagon. With Limestone Springs gone dry, even the Apaches ain't likely to cross through here—but with Injuns you can't be sartain. Here's the key."

The men seemed well satisfied and watched without comment. Russ, however, scowled and restlessly hitched his big shoulders.

AN HOUR later Pete Minks had ridden out of sight over the blazing flats to the south and the single wagon drawn by three heaving oxen creaked slowly eastward.

Frank Baines, suddenly entrusted with greater responsibility than he had ever known before in his life, considered the situation. It was not heartening.

The men had a little water in their canteens and there were perhaps two gallons in the keg in the wagon. That might last three days. There were eight to drink it, two of them women. The oxen, of course, would have to be shot unless the Springs suddenly came to life after a little shovel work. And that was not likely.

Russ Shelvington strode stolidly alongside the wagon, occasionally addressing the girl Lois who was tending the older woman. Mary Hunt, however, huddled in the wagon bed and would not be comforted. Her husband had died of fever some six weeks before on the muddy eastern prairie and she had lapsed into a listless state of acute despondency. She had relatives in California and she was still a strong woman in middle life, but she had, seemingly, lost the will to live.

The girl Lois had joined the group with her brother, Tom, who walked along silently now with the other men. She was scarcely out of her teens, slender and well-formed, with smooth, shoulder-long blond hair and oddly contrasting hazel eyes. She smiled quickly, but a little crease of worry had etched itself on her forehead and her gaze was grave and strangely mature.

Dust rose and floated in the wake of the wagon, scarcely stirred by the fingers of a faint hot wind which lifted from the level plain and then died again. Far overhead the great vulture followed, riding the air currents with an almost imperceptible tilt and lift of his broad wings. And beyond the dwarf butte of weathered limestone which marked the Springs broke the circle of horizon.

Two hours later the wagon grated to a halt beside the shallow conical depression of baked mud which was Limestone Springs. A few dried bottleweeds and some withered bloodroot straggled along the edges but otherwise there was no indication that water had ever filled the bed. The mud was baked hard as adobe and loose sand had already begun to filter into the fissures.

The three remaining oxen were unyoked and at once plodded clumsily into the dry spring bed where they stood moaning softly.

The girl reached down and touched Frank Baines' arm. "Can't we spare a little water for them?"

He shook his head. "We've only got a half keg. That'd be just a swallow between 'em. Tomorrow we'll butcher them and spread out the meat to dry."

Night came on with its cooler winds and at last the oxen became quiet and they slept, the two women in the wagon, the men on the sand nearby.

After the dry morning meal—left-over biscuits and bacon and a swallow of water apiece—two men were detailed to butcher the oxen while the others took shovels and a miner's pick and clambered over the saucer-rim of the Springs. The hardened earth crumbled away and dust swirled up from the pockets.

Noon came. The sun beat down from straight overhead with a fierce intensity and at last the men left the spring bed and came to the wagon, sweaty, dust-caked, grim and silent.

Another swallow of water and they slid under the wagon in the shade and lay quiet, too exhausted to talk.

By mid-afternoon they were at work again. The baked mud was almost like stone in some places. The shovels rasped and hammered and the earth broke grudgingly, dry and coarse and unchanging.

At last Russ Shelvington hurled down his shovel. "There never was water in this blasted dust hole! Let's get out of here while we can still walk away!"

The men rested on their shovels and looked at Frank Baines.

He straightened up. He was silent a moment. "We wouldn't get far," he said finally. He mopped his forehead. "Seen pasture springs cleaned back East. Sometimes you're almost right on water before there's any sign." He started digging again.

Reluctantly, the four men followed suit. Russ stood scowling into the sun and finally went to the wagon. Frank noticed his absence but said nothing.

That night, after a supper consisting of

tough ox meat and hardtack, the men clustered morosely on the sand. Mary Hunt, the older woman, had been sick during the day and now Lois Kent remained inside the wagon with her.

Russ Shelvington spoke at last, his voice toneless and hollow in the strained eerie silence of the place.

"If you don't hit water come noon, I'm leavin' with Lois and our share of the water and grub."

Frank Baines gazed across at the bigger man. His voice held an edge of authority which momentarily startled the men.

"You'll leave when I say so, Russ."

Russ swung his head, teetered on his heels as if he were about to rise and sat back on the sand. His surprise vanished and he laughed mirthlessly. "Pete Minks ain't here now."

Morning came, hot and breathless, and again the men took their shovels and filed into the torn pitted bed of the Springs.

Suddenly someone yelled. The men whirled. Tom Kent stood transfixed, staring at his shovel rammed inches deep into soft mud.

They clustered about and bent over. Oozing along the edge of the shovel was a tiny trickle of water.

The shallow pool required constant attention. Silt slid in, stirring up the mud; sand and whitish alkali dust swirled in with the occasional winds which swept across the flats and the sun quickly absorbed all but the very center of the pool.

Frank Baines remained hopeful, but the other men became morose and surly. Russ Shelvington sat apart from the wagon at night, sullen and critical, and complained to the men. The girl Lois remained outwardly cheerful, but Mary Hunt lay in the wagon bed night and day, unable or refusing to eat the ox meat.

No life ever appeared in the place. The only visitor was the black vulture which day after day appeared in the sky overhead, swinging in broad arcs, sometimes circling so low that its shadow swept over the wagon, startling them, then spiraling upward until it seemed to disappear in the great shield of the sun.

One morning Lois Kent came out of the wagon with a strange stricken expression and told them that Mary Hunt had died during the night. They had expected it, somewhere in the back of their minds, and yet they were suddenly shocked and subdued.

They dug a grave south of the wagon and stood in a semi-circle, grim and expressionless, while Lois Kent recited the simple prayers.

As she passed Frank Baines on her way back to the wagon, she said something which he pondered often in the days to follow: "She might have lived, but she didn't want to."

RUSS SHELVINGTON became increasingly belligerent and watching him, Frank Baines knew the day would come when the two of them could no longer exist peaceably side by side. He dreaded that day for the sake of the girl Lois, but he knew it had to come and wished it were over with. It was waiting and daily, hourly tension that raveled and wore the nerves of men.

The girl remained cheerful with a quick smile and encouraging word but her features in repose betrayed a gravity, a kind of sadness, deep, mute and somehow half-secret. She treated Russ Shelvington with kindness, but there was a new reserve in her manner, the faint unwilling shadow of reproach.

One morning they awoke to a dawn that did not come. The sun rose up behind a swirling amber-colored cloud, the air became stifling. There was no direct sun, only a weird reflection of half-light, a brown haze shrouding the horizon and at last a deep tawny twilight which covered the whole eastern sky.

The wind began to blow, lifting the sand in a seemingly solid sheet. They drew the wagon canvas tightly together, stretched tarpaulins over the front and back and crouched together in the bed. It grew steadily darker and they became conscious of a dull unceasing roar. The wagon rocked, sand shot through tiny fissures in fierce little torrents, spraying against their faces, pooling up on the boards.

All day the wind blew, blasting against the wagon in a constant stream. They chewed the dry ox meat, reserving the little water for the girl. No one voiced the one thought which was like a weight upon them all: barring miracles, their single source of water would be buried under the sand.

Night came, but still the sand raced

past. It grew slightly cooler however, and they slept a little, fitfully, in brief uneasy snatches.

Finally, by mid-morning, the wind lost some of its power. It drove against the wagon in swift sporadic rushes and then died down altogether.

They climbed out, cramped and light-headed in the sudden eerie silence, and stared about them. A great drift of sand sloped against the wagon to the hubs of the wheels; there were strange dunes out on the desert where there had been none before and smooth flats where the ground had been broken. The spring bed had filled with sand like a saucer. Nothing was visible but the faint outline of its rim, tracing an almost imperceptible circle.

The men stared at it with a swift shock of despair, too appalled even to speak.

All that afternoon they dug, but their shovels struck only loose sand. As the swift violet twilight closed over the desert, they crouched by the wagon, red-eyed, fearful and sullen. They had gone without water for two days now, and they were desperate. Big Russ Shelvington had been strangely quiet this day, but Frank Baines read the nature of the man and was not deceived.

Dawn came, stifling and windless after the storm of the previous day, and again they took up their shovels and began to dig.

The sun flared higher in the sky, beat down with a merciless intensity. Watching the men, Frank wondered how much more they could endure. He was kneeling down, scooping with his hands at sand which seemed damp, when he heard his name called. He looked up. Lois Kent stood near the wagon calling his name in a strained warning tone which brought him alert. He started to answer and then saw her purpose. Russ Shelvington had gone to the wagon and now he was returning.

His eyes were on Frank. He stopped a few yards away.

"Blast you!" he said thickly. "She won't go with me. You talked to her!" He glanced around at the other four men. "You got us into this! If that double-crossing ox-killer didn't give you a gun—"

Frank's eyes swiftly swept the men and he made his decision. He drew out the revolver and swung it in his hand. It landed yards away on the sand.

"All right, Russ," he said coolly.

Russ stared, momentarily bewildered, then an expression of keen exultation swept across his face and he lunged forward.

Frank sidestepped, rammed his fist against the bigger man's jaw. Russ pitched awkwardly to the sand, caught off balance by the blow and carried forward by his own momentum. He grunted, got quickly to his feet and rushed again.

Frank tried to avoid the bearlike rushes, keep his distance and fight a stand-up battle, but it was useless. In spite of those hard fists hammering his face, the bigger man crowded ever forward, eager for the chance to close. The blows sent the wind whistling from his lungs and jarred him backward, but he succeeded at last. The men locked, braced together for a few seconds and toppled to the sand.

It was then that Frank fully understood: this was no mere contest to decide who should give the orders; it was a fight to the death.

Suddenly he found himself underneath; a fist smashed him squarely in the face and overhead the sky went strangely black. He was dazed only seconds, but when he had rushed back to consciousness he found his throat clutched in a grip of steel.

Furiously, with the deep strength of desperation, he swung his right arm and hammered his fist solidly against the bigger man's left side. Russ gasped, relaxed his grip momentarily, and in that instant Frank tore free. With his every ounce of remaining power, he brought up his knees and reared himself half from the sand. Then his own hands locked about a throat.

Hours afterward, it seemed, he was still lying in the sand with a weight on him while someone pounded and pulled at his arms. He heard a low murmur of voices and opened his eyes.

Something with a hideous black distorted face was sprawled across his chest. Then he saw Tom Kent bending over, prying at his hands, and he understood. Painfully, with a slow conscious effort, he unlaced his fingers from the thing's throat.

Later, while he lay in the shade of the wagon, the men took up their shovels and began to dig a grave some distance from the spring bed.

Lois Kent brushed his gashed face with a moistened cloth. Once he opened his eyes, looked up at her and spoke. "I'm sorry," he said.

She was white-faced but tearless. "I thought you'd have to," was all she answered.

The next day they dug in damp sand and by mid-afternoon a shallow puddle of muddy water gleamed in the basin.

Day after day the sun burned the baked earth; sometimes sporadic deceiving little winds sprang up, rustled through the dead buffalo grass and then dwindled away, leaving the atmosphere more insufferable than before.

The men lapsed into a state of feverish light-headed hallucination. Finally even Lois lay still on her cot in the wagon and did not speak.

One day when he brought water, she raised herself and smiled weakly. Her eyes were suddenly bright and soft with a light which even fever did not produce.

"I want you to know, Frank," she whispered, "whatever happens—I love you." She lifted her hand and touched his face. "We can die—together, at least." She lay back, smiling.

He was filled with a strange tenderness. He had worshipped her, remotely, but he had not understood until now. As he pressed his lips against her hot forehead, he felt a new strength and a wild surging rebellion. He bathed her face and wrists with a cool wet cloth, whispering to her, savagely almost, hardly knowing what he was saying.

He climbed dizzily out of the wagon, like a man possessed. He raised his arms and started to curse, stopped abruptly, knelt down and began to pray.

The four men crouched underneath the wagon, regarding him without interest. At last they had lost the will to live.

He arose at last, calm with a terrible fixed determination. He noticed the men, clinging there, waiting to die, and felt a rush of blind unreasonable rage, a hatred for them because they did not share his desire to live. But as he scowled at them he at length began to comprehend: they had nothing left to live for. He had love. Perhaps hate might keep them alive.

He climbed back into the wagon and came out carrying Pete Mink's long black buckskin ox-whip. He swore at them until they noticed him; then he raised his arm and lashed the whip in amongst them. They cursed and crept away, but could not escape. He drove them forth, snarling like wolves, and herded them toward the spring.

THE Papago pack burros plodded patiently across the alkali flat, skirted a low ledge of limestone and struck out across the sand. Pete Minks raised up in his saddle and squinted.

He nodded, motioned to the Indian who rode stolidly beside him. "That's it! That's the butte, Cochido! There's the wagon on the left!"

The Indian grunted without enthusiasm. He would never understand the ways of white men. Why should Cochido and six of his best bucks ride two hundred miles across the desert merely in order to bury a few bones? Why should this white man whom they had found nearly dead of thirst insist on returning to the dried-out water hole which had caused his suffering?

The pack burros suddenly lifted their heads and began to hurry. The riders trotted after them and presently rounded the butte.

Pete Minks' eyes were on the sand-blasted wagon as he spoke to the Papago chief. "They had a sand storm here. Never find much now. Must be all buried." He shook his head. "Anyway," he added, "the buzzards didn't get 'em."

For answer Cochido opened his mouth and managed a mighty "Uhhh!"

Pete glanced at him and then followed his gaze.

His eyes widened with a swift shock, for five men, five living skeletons of men, had arisen suddenly out of the sand and now stood wildly regarding the pack train. They were brown withered mummies dressed in rags. All their life seemed to have shrunk up and sunk into the burning pits of their eyes. One of them carried a long black buckskin ox-whip.

As the Indians cowered back in superstitious fear, this creature came forward. His eyes settled on Pete Minks.

The guide walked his horse forward and peered down. "Frank Baines!"

The figure moved its lips for a full minute before the words came through. "Mary Hunt died. Killed Russ. Had to."

It stopped and then went on. "Help Lois. In the wagon. Help her. Help—" It looked down at the whip in its hand, attempted some explanation, then staggered and slumped to the sand.

In an instant the other four mummies were upon it, snarling their hatred. Pete Minks sprang off his horse and threw them off.

Cochido joined him, but not until three other Papagos had come forward were they finally subdued.

They found the girl Lois in the wagon, wasted, feverish, but still conscious, and after the six of them had been given fresh water and the fever tea of the Papagos, they were laid on clean blankets in the wagon bed. Then the Papagos hitched up their burros and the big wagon lurched forward out of the sand.

Pete Minks spoke to Cochido as the wagon rolled forward.

"Looks as if they'll all live—but I'll never believe it!"

As the wagon groaned past the butte and creaked across the alkali flat, the great black vulture swung low over the springs and then lifted and soared and spiraled ever upward until it became a speck, a mere mote, which seemed at last swallowed completely in the huge flaring rim of the sun.

Western Wit and Wisdom

WHEN wagon trains headed for any part of the West, both before and after the gold rush, they were made up according to a stylized pattern. The wagons, slightly in echelon, rode four abreast and each column was at least four wagons deep. This was considered ideal for resisting a sudden Indian attack which might not permit a circle to be formed. If a train was larger, the columns were deepened, but rarely was a file widened to exceed six wagons. Six wagons would take up too much room and the formation would have to be broken at narrow passages.

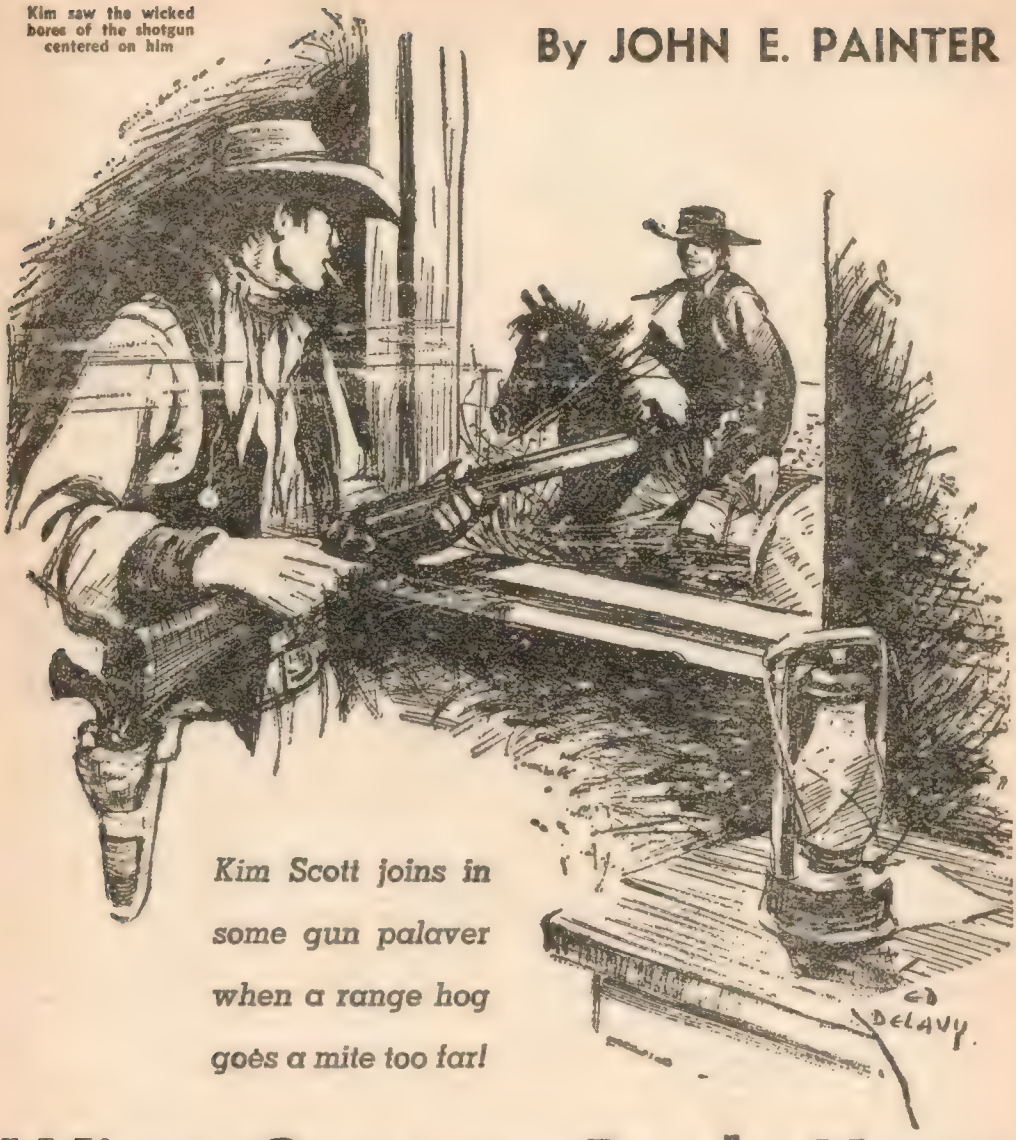
EARLY in the California gold rush, one adventurer fetched along his very young son. Legend has it that every morning when the father left to go to his claim, the young lad, unwilling to be left behind alone, would say, "I go." The claim being no place for a button, his father would answer, "O, no!" Today two towns stand on the ground where the boy and his dad once camped and worked. They are called Igo and Ono.

SINCE the silent picture days up to the present time, movie stars have found Western living agreeable. One such is Michael O'Shea, who owns a ranch near Gallup, New Mexico, and who is such a proficient rider that he's always willing to compete in local rodeos. O'Shea is currently one of the principals in "The Big Wheel," a new United Artists' release starring Mickey Rooney which is an epic of the Indianapolis auto race classic. It's an excellent picture packed with excitement and action.

THE Old West ain't what it used to be. A local cowman tied his horse to a hitching rack in Tempe, Arizona, and went about his business. When he got back a couple of hours later he found a parking ticket tied to his saddle horn!

Kim saw the wicked bores of the shotgun centered on him

By JOHN E. PAINTER



Kim Scott joins in some gun palaver when a range hog goes a mite too far!

Wipe-Out on Rack Heap

KIM SCOTT pulled his six-foot-two-inch form to its feet by degrees. He stretched ponderously and the muscles played freely across his wide shoulders. His quick glance took in the men sitting or lying in indolent ease around the campfire and a grin spread across his face.

This was the first real rest they had known in three long months, during which they had trailed two thousand head of cattle through storms, and dry stretches, over mountains and across rivers to the Rack Heap valley. They had put the last of the stragglers over the hill in the late afternoon and had watched

with pleasure as the herd roared to the creek, then spread out in the lush grass.

Darkness lay on the land and except for the low talk of the punchers, there was no alien sound until the hoofbeats came near. Kim waited for the rider, his big frame relaxed. The newcomer, mounted on a black, pulled up and nodded, while his eyes ran a circle.

Kim Scott spoke and the silence ran on for long seconds as he waited for the stranger to reply. A tingle of anger pricked at Kim and he stepped forward. Out of the darkness a voice called at him. "Stand hitched, hombre. Same for the rest of you jiggers. You show plain."

"What the blazes?" Scott growled. "Who are you and why the watch-dogs in ambush?"

"My name is Bly," the man replied. His voice was low and even, pleasant to hear. He was small and his face showed pale by the firelight as he sat with hands crossed on his saddle-horn. "I am not sure how my visit will be welcomed, so I took the precaution of insuring my safety."

Scott did not allow his surprise to show in face or voice as he said, "Well now, sir, any man who comes in peace will be welcome at a Circle K camp. Light a while."

"I'm afraid you don't understand," Bly said patiently. "This is a business call. I'll pay my social respects later—perhaps."

"Then state your business," Kim let his riding irritation show in his words.

"I'll be brief," Bly said. "We live five miles downstream from here. We've been there a long time and we hate to see too many others crowd in here. However, if the newcomers are reasonable, we let them stay. There are two other men on the far side of the valley and they are agreeable neighbors. If you stay, you will be expected to pay to me, as the oldest resident, a grazing fee of fifty cents per head per year. A fair rate, we believe."

Kim listened briefly to the mutterings of his men around the fire before replying, "Reckon you got a knot for a head, Mister. This is free range. I made shore of that before I moved this herd up from Kansas. I, and four of my men, homesteaded on the headwaters of this creek. That bein' the case, you're nothing but a high-binder. Now get the blazes out of my camp."

BLY shrugged lightly and answered: "Oh, you'll pay, Mr. Scott. You see, I even know your name. Your herd was spotted several days ago and I looked into it, just in case you were coming here. The only question is how much inconvenience and how many losses you'll sustain before coming to terms. If you resist me, you'll be broke and without a head of stock in three months. Think about it."

Kim took a step forward, his hands making big fists, then a rifle fired and a bullet whined low over his head. He stopped and his voice was heavy with rage. "You'll collect in Gehenna, Bly. Don't let us catch you or any of your gun-dogs on this range. Vamoose."

Silently, Bly turned the black and rode away. Soon other horses joined him in the darkness and presently all sounds died away.

"What do you make of that?" asked Dan Chambers, the foreman. "Was he some crack-pot or is he serious?"

"I think he meant it," Kim answered.

Broad daylight found the wagons on the move toward the head of the creek where the main ranch house would be located. Kim's abstract bruskness, and the somber cast of his dark face, told his men better than words that his thoughts were elsewhere. Abruptly, the big man turned the sorrel he rode and roweling him lightly, cut off across the valley.

He was a high shape in the saddle and he made his way through the verdant grass, straight toward the opposite side of the valley. He forded the creek, scarcely noting that the horses swam several feet of it. He jogged into a ranch yard and let his eyes run over the place, liking what he saw. A good manager ramrodded this spread, he thought.

He saw the woman, then, standing in the shadow just inside the front door. Stepping down from the saddle, he doffed his hat and spoke pleasantly. "Howdy, Ma'am, I'm from across the way." His gesture indicated the far side of the valley. "The Circle K. Is the man of the place at home?"

She came out into the light, a woman in the late forties, lines of worry cut deep into her plain face. Her voice was timid, unsure. "You're not one of Mr. Bly's men? You're not here after the money?"

Scott shook his head, his eyes dark with his feelings. He said, "No, I'm no part of Bly's highbindin' outfit. Is your husband at home, Ma'am?"

She nodded reluctantly. "He's down in the lower corral, workin' some horses." She watched carefully as he mounted and rode around the corner of the house.

The noise in the corral covered his approach and Kim was perched on the top rail of the fence before the man inside knew he was near. The fellow was talking to a skittish colt, petting him and rubbing him in the manner of a horse lover, and he jumped when Kim spoke. The naked look he turned on Scott was fear, covered quickly, but plain to be seen.

"I'm Kim Scott, Circle K," Kim said almost lazily. "Just got in last night, across the way. Thought I'd ride over and say hello to my neighbor."

The look of relief was too apparent to be ignored and the man answered gustily, "Little nervous, workin' with these horses. Shore glad to know you. Abe Rosto is my name."

He came over to the fence, wiping his hand on his jeans before offering it to Kim. The big man judged Rosto to be fifty but the years had used him hard and there was little of happiness or pleasure in the lean face. Though almost as tall as Scott, he lacked many pounds of the other's weight and gray hair and stooped shoulders added years to his appearance.

Kim slid down on the inside of the fence to take the proffered hand. No humor touched the dark face and there was none in his voice. "Rosto — Bly came to my camp last night. I came over to see what manner of man you are, to pay tribute to a robber like him. Your place ain't like I thought it'd be."

Rosto lifted his shoulders, let them fall, and there was no resentment on his face. He said, carefully, "You're new, Scott, and young. But you don't know Bly. When he's done with you, you'll pay and be glad to be let alone. I was tough when I came but his hardcase outfit soon took the starch out of me. I'm doin' pretty well now and what I pay ain't hurtin' me any more."

Kim let the silence run long before outraged words burst from his lips. "What right has Bly to make himself boss and make people pay to live on free range? I didn't come all the way here to shell out to some hardcase that's got everyone buffaloed."

Rosto nodded, said regretfully, "You'll fight, shore, but you'll wind up like us. Might makes right, in this case."

"Not to me," Kim said stubbornly. "Feller down-creek feel the same as you do?"

"No use to feel any other way," Rosto said. "You'll see. A few of your men dead, your stock killed. No way to get at him. You can't prove anythin' and the law won't do anythin'."

CLIMBING over the fence, Kim spoke through the bars. "I'm goin' to see the master-man, anyhow. Could I count on you and the other feller for any help at all?"

Rosto came close to the fence and peered at Kim Scott a long time before he said, "You make me feel cheap and cowardly but the answer is no. I'll lift no finger against Bly. Once upon a time, maybe—" He let the words trail away.

Kim nodded, lifted himself onto his sorrel and jogged off, his dark face somber. He wondered about the man Rosto and the fear that ran in him. Terrible things had to happen to a man to drive fear so deep.

Kim angled across the valley, crossed the stream again and so came to the lower end. Clearly then he saw why Rosto had been so certain no one could get at Bly. An island jutted up about thirty feet above the flat grassland and the ranchhouse and buildings sat atop it. One road was cut at an angle to the top and it was so situated that three or four men could hold it against any number of attackers. There were few places that a man, let alone a horse, could negotiate to gain the top, so a surprise attack was out of the question and a direct attack would be foolhardy.

Kim rode ahead boldly, as his mind cataloged and discarded the possibilities, and he aimed straight for the road. Strangely, he heard no sound as he climbed and so came into the yard.

Bly appeared on the porch and a pleasant smile touched his lips. "Hello, Mr. Scott," he said, as if to an old friend. "I see you've come to reconnoiter my little place. Don't be deceived by its inno-

cent appearance. There are at least three guns on you and have been since you came into sight."

Kim sat slack in the saddle but his eyes cut down at the smaller man as he said, "No doubt. Why not have 'em shoot me now and get it over with, Bly? You'll have to kill me sooner or later. If I stay alive, you'll die."

Bly shook his head in cool denial. "I think not. And I prefer to have you alive. The wisdom of having me for a friend rather than an enemy will soon be apparent to you."

Rage took the reins in Kim and his hands dropped to the .45s on his hips. That far he went and stopped, for a voice rapped at him, "That's fur 'nuf, 'less you want to be pickin' buckshot from whut's left of yuh after this Greener goes off."

Kim slanted a quick glance at the window, saw the hardcase there and the wicked bores of the shotgun centered on him. He drew a long breath and lifted his hands to the horn. "All right," Kim said, a hard run of meanness in his voice. "All right. Le's see if you'll murder a man. I'm comin' off this horse after you with my bare hands, Bly."

Dropping out of saddle, Kim made the porch in three strides. As he left the saddle, Bly's voice lifted in a call, "Rous, Trace, Benty, take care of Scott but don't kill him." As he called, Bly moved back a little and waited. Two hombres came out of the house and another around the corner on the run. Scott had time for only one blow at the little blackmailer and he grunted savagely as he landed a solid left and saw Bly carom off the wall.

Kim jumped to the edge of the porch to meet the single foe and his sledging blows knocked the man far out into the yard. Kim whirled to meet the other two and batted one of them to his knees before the other wielded a gun barrel over his head. The big man went to his knees and was trying doggedly to arise when the second blow caught him.

Scott came to at the bottom of the road and for a few minutes he was violently ill from the pain in his beaten face and body. He knew he had been pistol-whipped and kicked severely and it took him a terrible time to mount his horse.

Dan Chambers and a couple of the hands ran to meet him and help him down from his horse. "Lost another round," Kim said thickly, through battered lips. "The coyotes' den is a fortress. Dan, I want the men to keep the cattle pushed up to this end of the valley. Keep a sharp watch for trouble."

IT WAS three days before Kim could move about with any ease, then he started helping on the house. His growing irritation drove him furiously, despite his stiff, aching body, and it was mid-afternoon before he straightened from his labor, when he heard a running horse. The animal was ridden by Rod Babson, a tough and top-run cowhand, and he was shouting as he came near.

"Kim," he called, "four of them high-binders got Slim down by the creek. I seen 'em from that little hump and come for help. We better get!"

Men were jumping for mounts before he finished talking and six men spurred horses into a run as they hit saddles. They swept past the hump where Rod had been and cut a line for the creek. There were no riders visible and no sign of Slim. Then they found him, lying just on the bank of the creek and he wasn't a pretty sight. He had been beaten severely and the bank was stained with his blood but he was still alive when Kim put a hand over his heart.

Scott looked up, relief in his face. "He's alive. Pretty banged up but I reckon he'll live. Get his horse, Rod, and we'll get him to camp. We'll have to take it careful."

"Here's somethin' else," Bob Fields, who had scouted down-creek, shouted. "They've beefed six head of our stock."

At camp, after Slim's wounds had been dressed and he was made comfortable in the emptied bed of a spring wagon, Dan went up to Kim. "Boss," he asked bluntly, "What you goin' to do? I got a couple of the fellers skinnin' out them beefs, so we can save the hides and use what meat we can. We're gettin' whipped every way so far. What will you do now?"

"Carry the war to them," Kim answered with equal bluntness. He lifted his voice so all the riders could hear. "When you men ride after this, keep in pairs. Don't let any strangers get close to you, unless you have guns on 'em. Keep the stock up this way as much as you can."

Kim turned back to Dan and continued

in a lowered tone, "There's a plan cookin' in my head. I'm goin' back to that town we passed forty miles or so out. I don't want to buy the things I want in Rack Heap, 'cause I got a suspicion that's Bly town. I'll wait for dark to leave, so I won't be spotted. When I get back, we'll make war plans."

The big man rode away into the night and in the bright hours of morning, came to the town of Banner. He stabled the horse for a grain feed and rest before seeking the hotel and a bed for himself.

It was mid-afternoon when he awakened and shortly after, he finished a big meal in the hotel dining room. Leaving there, he angled across the street to the general store. When he left, he carried a heavy sack on his shoulder.

He rode hard on the return trip and the stars were paling with the coming of morning when he saw the fires of the Circle K camp. He was still two hundred yards from them when a voice cut at him out of the night. "Stand fast, mister, 'til you say who you are."

Kim recognized Rod's tones and answered easily, "Good work, Rod. Reckon I show pretty clear against the stars, eh?"

"You do," Rod admitted briefly. "Everythin's calm here. Been no trouble."

"Good," Scott said, as he rode on. "We'll have work to do tomorrow night."

THE following starlit midnight, Kim called the men around him. By lantern light, he drew a map in the dust and talked:

"You men have all seen the buildings. Bob, you'll go back along the east side about a hundred and fifty feet. That'll put you about at the rear of the bunkhouse. Ed, you stay about thirty-forty feet north of Bob. When you let go, aim for the middle of the building. You'll have to stand back a ways and throw hard. Rod and I will take the house. Tom, you'll stay with the horses. Don't do anythin' until I fire two quick shots. Dan, you stay here and look after Slim."

Minutes later, saddles creaked, then the sounds of moving horses faded.

Hunkered by a boulder at the foot of the road leading to Bly's house, Kim shouted up into the night. "Hello, Bly. I want to talk to you."

"Bly's asleep," a rough voice answered from the top of the road. "Pull out, 'fore I throw lead yore way."

"You'd better call Bly and that mighty sudden," Scott called.

"I'm here now," Bly said. "What are you after, Scott? You know you can't get up here. If you came to make peace, you know my terms."

A rankling anger was in Kim's reply. "Bly, I don't know why but I hate to see men die without warnin'. I'll give you two minutes to line up your gun-butchers and march 'em down the road. Have 'em bring lanterns to show themselves."

Bly's laugh floated down, low and jeering. Kim waited but heard nothing more. He shrugged with resignation and the gun in his hand crashed twice. The gunny at the top laced Kim's hiding place with bullets but being well protected, the big man ignored them.

Kim Scott was now applying match flame to the fuse of the homemade, black powder bomb in his hand and as the fuse spluttered, he drew back and heaved it well over the rim above him. Seconds dribbled by, then an explosion blossomed in the night, followed by two more almost together, then a final one. After the splatter of falling debris ceased, the curses and screams of injured men could be heard.

Cupping his hands about his mouth, Kim shouted, "Bly, do you want more? We're prepared to blow this whole rock down, if we have to."

"To blazes with Bly," a strange voice replied. "Half of us are hurt or dead. We're comin' down."

"Bring lights," Scott instructed, "and no guns."

Rod appeared beside Kim and shortly Bob and Ed called from the other side of the road. A light flickered at the top of the road and a man walked down, holding the lantern carefully high. Behind him came others, some being helped. The last man down held another lantern and Kim ran his eyes over the group.

"Where's Bly?" he asked sharply.

"Still up there," the lantern bearer grunted. "The house is on fire and he's tryin' to put it out."

"He won't need the house," Kim said grimly. He asked another question. "Are the horses up there in any danger from the fire?"

The fellow shook his head. "They busted down the corral and are runnin' loose."

Kim straightened his big form and thumbed fresh shells into his gun. He glanced at Rod and said, "I'm goin' after Bly. He's the hombre we want most."

"I'll side you," Rod said quietly.

"No," Kim refused bluntly. "My chore. You're needed here to keep a gun and an eye on these fellers."

Kim went up, keeping close to the wall, and so came out on top. The house was a solid pattern of fire and in front of it, Bly ran back and forth, beating futilely at the flames.

"Bly, you might as well stop," Kim shouted, his voice reaching above the crackle of the flames. "Come on and I'll give you a start out of the country."

Bly was at the far corner from Kim and he dropped the blanket dully. Then the firelight winked on a gun in his hand as he started for Scott. He was talking as he came, slow step by step.

"You were smarter than I figured. I should have killed you when I had you but I thought I could handle you."

"Your mistake," Scott said harshly, and the gun in his hand tipped up. Then he gave an involuntary cry of alarm. "Look out—the chimney!"

His warning was unheard as the huge fireplace and chimney, upset by falling roof beams, toppled out and fell with a grinding roar.

Half sick, Kim stood by until the dust settled and he could see the broken thing that had been Bly.

His chest rose and fell in a sigh of relief, mixed with a vague regret, as he turned down the road.

"Stop, or We'll Burn You Down!"

IN THE dirty gray light of a chill daybreak, Wayne Morgan pushed out of the winding sand-hills trail into the edge of Creek City. He was headed on for Saguaro County, to pay off some dinero, given to him by a dying man to settle a debt. Suddenly he heard a faint cry out of the mist, the rattle of spur chains on the boots of a running man. Morgan quickly drove his roan ahead, and the sounds seemed closer. Then the command:

"Stop, or we'll burn you down!"

Morgan was out of the kak, gliding forward, a gun drawn, as a wraithlike figure loomed in the uncertain light. . . .

The sudden, deadly events of the next few moments convinced Morgan that he ought to stay on in Creek City for a while, instead of riding peacefully through. And stay he did—to combat the worst gang of bushwackers and schemers in all his experience as a masked avenger! The whole story's told in a smashing, action-packed novel of the dim trails—

TRIGGERS ON THE YELLOWWATER

By T. W. FORD

COMING IN OUR NEXT ISSUE — PLUS OTHER STORIES AND FEATURES!

LINGO of the LAW

By JACKSON COLE

Tim Cooper finds saving a ranch takes fancy words—and fancier shooting!

Cooper's bullet whistled by the fleeing man

WHEN Tim Cooper bought the old Leaning A spread and figured on settling down and being a cattleman, it didn't create any undue excitement in Cottonwood County. Folks in that region spent a lot of time minding their own business. If Cooper wanted to give up a good riding job on the Horseshoe and start in being a rancher that was up to him.

There was one local citizen who did object though, and that was Jed Shay. He was one of those men who talked big and did very little.

"Trouble with Jed Shay is that he was frightened by work when he was a child," said old John Payton, the owner of the general store in town. Payton was a man of opinions, and he always had them about everybody. "Yes, sir, scared him so bad that he never did get over it."

Shay was a fair to middling cowhand, but when he got a job with an outfit and collected two or three months' pay he would quit. It got so the local ranchers figured he was about as dependable as a broken axle on a wagon stuck in a bog.

He did a lot of talking when he learned that Tim Cooper had bought the old Leaning A. The spread had been deserted ever since the owner had died ten years ago, and as ranches went it sure didn't go very far. Wasn't much to it, excepting for the buildings, corrals and some land.

"Cooper had no right to buy that place," Shay told everybody who would listen. "I always planned to take it over myself when I got around to it. Been figuring on having a ranch of my own for some time."

Since they were quite sure he didn't have enough money to buy even one cow, to say nothing of any ranch, the listeners were not impressed. Nevertheless Shay seemed to feel that Cooper's having bought the Leaning A was some sort of a personal insult to him.

If Tim Cooper heard what Shay had been saying, he didn't pay much attention. He was busy getting his new ranch into shape, fixing up the buildings, arranging to buy cattle and horses, and doing just about all a man had to do on a job like that. It seems that an uncle of his back East had died and left him ten thousand dollars, so Cooper had money in the bank.

Around the fourth week after Cooper had taken possession of the ranch Jed Shay rode out there. Even when Shay was broke and not eating too regularly, he managed to keep his horse and rigging. He was a big man in his forties who was all bluff and bluster.

TIM COOPER was a quiet dark-haired man in his late twenties, who looked just what he was—or had been—a top cowhand. He was repairing the floor of the ranchhouse porch when Jed Shay came riding up.

"Howdy, Cooper," Shay said curtly. "Glad to see you are fixing this place up for me."

Cooper put down the hammer and a nail and got to his feet. He stared at Shay like he was seeing him for the first time and was sorry he had even taken that one look.

"All of a sudden I'm deaf in one ear and can't hear so good out of the other," Cooper said. "But I thought you just said I was fixing this place up for you."

"I did," said Shay. "Soon as you get it in good shape, I'm planning to buy this ranch."

"There's just one thing that will prevent you from ever doin' that," said Cooper.

"What?" demanded Shay.

"Me," said Cooper as he picked up the hammer and nail and went back to work. "Go away. You bother me."

"You'll be sorry." Shay sounded like a six-year-old child taunting a playmate. "A month from now you'll be willin' to sell me this spread for any price I offer you."

Cooper finished driving in the nail. He stood up then and looked at Shay again and his glance was not what could rightly be called friendly.

"Just why will I be so anxious to sell in a month from now?" Cooper asked. "You planning to drive me off it with a double-barreled shotgun?"

"Of course not," said Shay. "Reckon nobody ever told you about this ranch, and I'm sure sorry for you."

"Save your tears until you meet another crocodile," said Cooper. "What's wrong with this spread?"

Shay looked around anxiously, and lowered his voice. "It's haunted," he said softly.

"I know." Cooper nodded solemnly. "But you go haunt some place else. I'm busy."

Jed Shay gave a disgusted snort and lifted his reins. His roan started moving. Apparently Shay knew a lot of good words but he was too mad to use them. He rode away without even once looking back. Cooper stood silently watching him until he faded into the distance, heading in the direction of the town five miles to the north.

"Looks like the end of a beautiful friendship," said a soft voice.

Cooper whirled around to see a tall, slender man leaning against the casing of the ranchhouse door calmly rolling a cigarette. The stranger was dressed in worn range clothes, and the gun in his holster looked like it had seen considerable use.

"Before you start asking questions, Slim Norwood is the name," said the stranger. "Former actor, traveling salesman, cowboy, and now what might be termed one of the legion called by the name of a nocturnal bird."

Tim Cooper had a fairly good education, and he was not a man to be overly impressed by a string of fancy words. He grinned.

"An owlhoot, eh?" he said. "Aren't you kind of reckless—admitting that to a stranger?"

"As one who is always conscious of his surroundings," said Norwood, "I have convinced myself that there is just the two of us on this ranch at present. I entered the ranchhouse through the back door to assure myself of that. You don't even happen to be wearing a gun. An oversight on your part I noticed with a certain amount of trepidation when you were exchanging verbal thrusts with the sinister individual on the horse."

"You keep on talking like that and I'll figure you must have read a book," said Cooper dryly. "Just what is all this flowery lingo leading up to anyway."

"I have news for you, my boy," said Norwood in a fatherly tone. "You have found getting this ranch in good running order is too much for one man and decided to take a partner. Said partner being one Barry Norwood, usually called Slim by his friends. His enemies can think of more caustic names."

I'M BEGINNING to think of a few myself," Cooper said. Suddenly he grew wary, for it dawned on him that Slim Norwood might be dangerous. "Just how do you aim to force me to make you my partner?"

"Force is a nasty word as you use it," said Norwood. "Let's say persuade. I have been around this section for a little over a month—merely a stranger hanging around. But in the town the size of Trail End one hears quite a lot of talk."

"About what?" demanded Cooper.

"Well, for instance about a forty dollar a month cowboy who has always wanted to own a ranch of his own," said Norwood, puffing on his cigarette. "Suddenly he is called away on business. When he returns he announces that his uncle has died and left him ten thousand dollars. He brought the money back with him in cash and deposited it in the Trail End bank. Since this Tim Cooper has never mentioned his uncle before the local citizens are mildly surprised."

"What of it?" demanded Cooper impatiently. "My uncle did die and I made a trip East for the funeral and to see the lawyer about the estate. The lawyer gave me the ten thousand in cash and I came back here and bought this ranch."

"But while you were away an outlaw robbed the bank in Big Mesa, fifty miles from here. He was about your build." Norwood smiled. "Or mine. I dropped a few hints around Trail End that I just might be a lawman working under cover. You know, folks might suspect I am lookin' for the man who robbed the bank in Big Mesa."

Cooper walked over to the porch steps and sat down. He wanted to think. It didn't seem possible that Norwood would be able to get away with the scheme the outlaw had evidently carefully plotted, and yet the slim, tall man was far from a fool. He obviously knew exactly what he was doing.

"What happens if I refuse to make you my partner?" Cooper asked finally, swinging around on the step so he could watch Norwood. "How about that?"

"I'll produce this." Norwood drew a badge from his pocket. "This makes me a U. S. deputy marshal. I'll swear you robbed the bank over in Big Mesa, and try and take you back there as my prisoner. On the way you will try to escape." Norwood shook his head sadly. "And I'll have to shoot to kill."

"You mind letting me see that badge?" Cooper asked.

"Sure." Norwood tossed it to him. "But give it back. I had a tough time getting that."

Cooper examined the badge. It was that of a U. S. deputy marshal all right. He stared thoughtfully at the initials B. N. scratched on the back of the badge.

"You have to kill the original owner to get this?" Cooper asked.

"No," said Norwood. "He's still living."

Cooper tossed the badge back and Norwood caught it and thrust it into his pocket. He had finished his cigarette, and he stamped out the burning stub on the floor of the porch.

"Looks like I've got me a partner," said Cooper as he stood up. "I just might not have had an uncle back East."

For an instant an expression of surprise swept over Norwood's lean face, but it quickly disappeared.

"I didn't expect you to give in that easily," he admitted frankly.

Cooper merely smiled. He had always figured he was a good judge of character, and he was surprised to find that, despite the evident ruthlessness of the man, he liked Slim Norwood.

"You better measure and saw some of those two by fours," Cooper said as he picked up the hammer and nails. "We'll have to get busy if we expect to get this porch finished before it gets dark, partner."

"I was afraid of that." Norwood sighed. "I just talked myself into some plain old-fashioned manual labor." But he picked up the saw and tape measure and went to work.

By sundown the two men had finished reflooring the porch. They went inside and Cooper lighted the oil lamps and started cooking supper. Norwood had proved a good worker, and Cooper still liked him.

"Wonder why that fellow Jed Shay is so anxious to buy this ranch that he has been trying to scare you away?" Norwood asked as the two men were eating. "I heard his silly attempt to make you believe this place is haunted. You ever stop to think that Shay is about the same build that we are?"

"So he is," said Cooper. "What about it?"

"I know that he was away at the same time you were," said Norwood thoughtfully stirring his coffee. "The thought intrigues me."

"Don't tell me you figure all three of us robbed the bank over at Big Mesa one at a time." Cooper grinned. "They only had one bank robbery. Not three."

"I heard that the loot from that robbery hasn't been found yet." Norwood still appeared to be thinking aloud. "The robber got about thirty thousand."

"And I only deposited ten thousand in the Trail End Bank," said Cooper dryly. "Wonder where I hid the other twenty thousand?"

Norwood looked at him, a strange searching look. "I've been wondering about that, too," he said.

Cooper got up from the table as he finished eating. He went over to where his cartridge belt was hanging from a hook, the gun in the holster. He had been wearing leather chaps over his levis to protect his knees while doing the carpentry work. He buckled on the gunbelt.

Norwood sat silently watching and made no attempt to stop him or to protest what Tim was doing.

From the darkness outside there came a weird wailing sound, and then a crashing noise. Cooper leaped out of the kitchen door, gun in hand. He fired as he saw a man dashing away. The man whirled, reaching for his gun as Cooper's bullet whistled by him.

"I told you I'd get rid of you, Cooper," Jed Shay shouted, as he raised his gun to fire at the ranch owner. "Now I'm getting rid of you for good."

COOPER pulled the trigger and heard the hammer of his gun click on an empty chamber. He pulled the trigger again and the same thing happened. From the doorway behind him a gun roared. Shay dropped to the ground before he could fire at Cooper, a bullet in his shoulder.

"Sorry, Tim." Norwood stood in the doorway, his smoking Colt in his hand. "I made a mistake in leaving just one bullet in your gun, but I didn't want to take too many chances."

"There's your man, Marshal." Cooper pointed to the moaning Jed Shay. "Reckon you should be able to make him talk, and tell you where he hid the money from the Big Mesa bank robbery. If he planted it on this ranch, I haven't run across it yet."

"How did you know I really am a deputy marshal?" Norwood asked in surprise. "I'm admitting it now."

"A man is proud of his badge when he scratches his initials on it as neat and carefully as you did, Norwood," Cooper said. "You suspected I really might be the bank robber so you tried that partner deal on me. You meant to watch me, hoping I would lead you to the rest of the bank money."

"You had me buffaloed when you said you just might not have had an uncle back East," said Norwood as they went to the wounded man. "I thought you were admitting you were the bank robber. I didn't like the idea."

"Get me to a doctor!" Shay pleaded as they reached him. "I'm dying."

"We're not doing a thing for you until you tell us where you hid the money from the Big Mesa bank robbery," Norwood said sternly, showing his badge. "I'm a U. S. deputy marshal, so talk."

"It is under the other end of the ranchhouse porch," said Shay weakly. "When Cooper fixed those loose boards on the porch floor, he sure sealed the money up good. I hoped to scare Cooper enough to buy the ranch from him. I could pretend some relative left me some money, too, when Cooper was willing to sell—and use some of the bank loot for the deal."

Norwood pulled open Shay's shirt and examined the shoulder wound. "You're not badly hurt," the marshal said. "You'll live."

"And I admitted everything," wailed Shay. "I always did talk too dadblamed much."

"Too bad this partnership deal was just a fake," Norwood said, looking at Cooper. "I was aiming to retire from being a lawman and get a little spread of my own. Even had five thousand dollars saved up toward it."

"That will buy us a nice herd, Partner," Cooper said. Then he grinned and held out his hand. "I kind of like having you around, Slim. You know such fancy words!"

Doc Goodfellow tells the amazing true story of Johnnie Behan, the Earps and the Clanton-McLowerys!

THE TOMBSTONE SHERIFF

Johnnie Behan bragged and strutted after the Earps left town

by JOHN EDWARD DALTON

DOC GOODFELLOW, Billy King and I were loafing away an afternoon in Billy's Tombstone bar, talking over old times. Doc had the floor. "I reckon," he said, "I know more about the Wyatt Earp and Clanton-McLowery feud than any man living.

"Wyatt Earp, his brothers, and Doc Holliday were on the side of law and order. Every honest man in town was on their side. I never heard a word against them until they were out of the country and couldn't defend themselves. The fact that their party was called the Law and Order Party shows clearly where Wyatt Earp and his fellow officers stood.

"Johnny Behan, Tombstone sheriff, run with the wild bunch. His friends, the Cowboy Party, were the Clanton-McLowery rustlers, stage and bank holdup

gang. With the exception of Billy Breakenridge and one or two other deputies, Johnnie's deputies were outlaws. Bob Paul told me one time that when his stage was held up, three of the robbers wore badges pinned on their shirts."

"I reckon," I interrupted, "most of your information is first hand. If the tales I heard are true you extracted plenty of lead from the buscaderos at one time or another."

"That's where I got my knowledge—it was all first hand," replied the doctor. "I was official medical man for the gang. They never called on anybody else. Many a night I'd wake up with someone banging on the door. It would be one of the gang on a foam-covered bronc. 'Curly wants you out at camp right away,' he'd say. I never argued, just saddled up and followed my guide.

Saved Patients, When Possible

"When I got to the outlaw stronghold, I'd find some of the buscaderos suffering from lead poisoning. I saved them if possible. If not, I made their trip over the last divide as easy as I could. The next day I'd hear of a fight between the Earps and the gang. Curly Bill and old man Clanton were outlaws. They didn't care who knew it. As long as they were on the loose civilization and prosperity would stand still. But they treated me white, paid me double for every trip, and in return I didn't talk.

"I had a certain amount of respect for the riders of the hootowl trail. With the exception of a few loose ideas about other people's property, they were honest. I never lost a cent on them.

"I never thought much of Johnnie Behan. I knew him well. He had been appointed, not elected, by the Territorial Government to enforce the law. Up to a certain point, he did, but beyond that—well, he knew which side his bread was buttered on. Here's a partial list of his deputies. They all rode the hootowl trail: Curly Bill and John Ringo; old man Clanton and his sons, Ike, Finn and Billy; the two McLowery boys; Pony Deal; Cherokee Jack; Al George; and a score of others.

"A man could have retired on the rewards offered for these badge toters dead or alive. Many were the times I heard them chuckling after some stage holdup when they galloped wildly over the Southern Arizona landscape trying to catch themselves.

"Johnny Behan gave the gang protection and they stood behind him. Take for instance the time John Ringo got roostered and shot up the City of Silver. He found the Earp boys in front of Bob Hatch's saloon and pool hall and challenged Wyatt to a handkerchief duel. Earp, who never hunted trouble, turned down the offer and suggested that the Tombstone Killer go sleep it off.

"But with invalid Doc Holliday, it was another story. 'If Wyatt doesn't want to fight,' he said to the outlaw, 'let's you and I trade a little lead. I've always wanted to kill a cow thief.' Ringo pawed and snorted and Doc said nothing. Ringo called Holliday a lot of hard names. Doc went for his hardware. 'Come on, cow thief,' he said smilingly, 'let's quit talking and get our peace-makers smoking.'

"John P. Clum, Tombstone's mayor, and Ilan R. English kept the men apart. 'You two hotheads,' snapped the mayor, 'aren't going to fight any duel in this town. There's been too much killing already.'

Marshal Rebukes Behan

"In the meantime, Prescott's United States marshal was in Sheriff Behan's office reading the riot act to Johnnie about outlaw activities in Tombstone.

" 'There isn't a thing about the way your office is run that I like,' he snapped. 'Tombstone is the most notorious outlaw hangout in the Southwest. You'll have to clean it up or I'll ask the governor to appoint a new sheriff.' Then he tossed a letter from the nation's capital on Johnnie's desk. It was from Washington, D. C. and read 'Have the City of Silver and Sudden Death cleaned up at once or you will be replaced by a marshal who can and will enforce the law.'

"Johnnie Behan turned red and tried to explain. 'Look here,' he blustered, 'I'm doing my best. This is a tough country.' Johnnie never got to finish what he was saying. White-faced and trembling, the Reverend Peabody burst through the door. 'Sheriff,' he quavered, 'the forces of evil are abroad in Tombstone. John

Ringo and Doc Holliday are getting ready to fight a duel in front of Hatch's pool hall.'

"Johnnie Behan was in a tough spot. He heartily wished the Reverend was some place else. He didn't want to arrest Ringo but with the United States marshal in town he had to do something.

" 'I'll stop it,' he said, reaching for his Stetson and six-shooters just as Billy Breakenridge arrived from a process-serving trip to Charleston and Galeyville. 'I'm glad you are here, Billy,' he said in a relieved voice. 'Ringo seems to be in a little trouble on Allen Street. Hurry over and bring him in before someone gets hurt.' Breakenridge nodded, tossed a bundle of papers on the desk, and left on the trot.

"Once more the marshal spoke. 'John Ringo's an outlaw and, if I remember right, there's a reward for his arrest on foot or in a casket in Owl City, New Mexico, for the murder of the Haslett brothers. Lock him up and notify the New Mexico authorities.' With those words the government man pulled his cream-colored sombrero a little lower on his forehead, saw to the hang of his guns and bade the sheriff a curt good-by. A little later he galloped out of town on the Tucson road.

Ringo Is Arrested

"Meantime, Billy Breakenridge arrested Ringo and brought him back to the courthouse. Ringo was hopping mad and so was the sheriff. They traded a lot of hard words. 'If you don't give up your hardware and go to jail, Fremont will take over,' said the sheriff. 'I hate to get tough because you boys are my friends but those are the marshal's orders. You can break jail as soon as he leaves town,' explained the sheriff. 'I got to make some sort of a show. If I don't the Governor will put someone in my place; likely one of the Earps and you know what that'll mean. They are on the prod and there won't be any love light in their eyes once they get on your trail. Wyatt tracks like an Apache and won't quit till you're hanging from a Cottonwood limb or sound asleep in Boot Hill.'

"John Ringo saw the light. He handed over his guns and Johnny Behan dropped them into a desk drawer. Break put Ringo in a cell without turning the key. He didn't stay in jail long. Billy Breakenridge sent word that the marshal had left for Tucson. In less than an hour the Tombstone Killer was loping towards Charleston, his six-shooters in place."

"I heard that story a number of times," said Billy King, nodding. "Pony Deal told it to me for one. He said Johnnie Behan wasn't exactly a member of the gang but he tipped off old man Clanton to every silver shipment or payroll that was on the move and took his cut. Without Johnnie Behan, the Clanton-McLowery and Curly Bill gang couldn't have worked. I remember the time Ringo high-graded a poker game in Evilsizer's saloon in Galeyville and one of the players with more nerve than judgment swore out a complaint. When the warrant was turned over to the sheriff, he called in Billy to serve it.

"Breakenridge found John Ringo mixing up a mess of sourdough biscuits in his cabin on the outskirts of Galeyville. When Ringo come to the door, Break said 'I got a warrant for you, John, and Behan says you'd better come in and stand trial.'

"The outlaw wanted to know what it was all about. John Ringo didn't like to be locked up, especially since the night a mob come within a frog's hair of lynching Curly Bill for the murder of City Marshal White. They'd have done it, too," chuckled Billy King, "if Wyatt Earp hadn't stood them off. Curly went free.

" 'How many people know you came over here after me?' asked the outlaw as he pushed a tin of sourdough biscuits into the oven and slammed the stove door.

" 'Just about everybody in town,' admitted Break. 'It sure isn't any secret. The Law and Order Party are bragging that they've got you where the hair is short at last.'

Ringo Promises to Surrender

" 'I tell you what I'll do, Billy,' said the outlaw. 'I'll give you John Ringo's word to meet you tomorrow night somewhere along the road. That dirty Law and Order Party might drygulch us between here and town. Neither do I want to be a cottonwood blossom.'

"Billy took John's word that once given was never broken. Of course, there

wasn't much else he could do," smiled Billy King. "Ringo was a dead shot and forked-lightning on the draw and Break was just fair. The outlaw met Tombstone's deputy not far from the city limits. Billy didn't lock him up, but sent him over to the jailer's house to sleep. The calaboose was full of drunks and hotheads, he explained later, and John didn't want to be kept awake by their yap-yapping.

"Early next morning Johnnie Behan heard that the Earps, Doc Holliday and the Prescott marshal were headed towards Charleston with a federal warrant for Curly Bill. Johnnie Behan turned Ringo loose, mounted him on a fast horse.

" 'Tell Curly,' he said, 'to hit the trail for the border and stay hidden till things blow over.'

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"John Ringo rode hard and fast and beat the Law and Order posse to Charleston by a matter of minutes.

"When the Earps reached the bridge, the outlaws were ready and anxious for a fight. 'Come on in, Wyatt!' called Ringo. 'The water's fine.' The officers bunched up, talked it over and decided to try their luck another day. So they neck-reined their mounts back to Tombstone.

"The next morning when court was called, John Ringo was ready for trial. The case was thrown out of court. No witnesses appeared against him. The poker player who signed the complaint was found dead behind Buckshot Garrett's bull corral, a thirty-thirty in his back.

Behan Eats With Outlaws

"Later I met Nellie Cashman, the Angel of Tombstone, who ran the Russ House, a miners' hotel. 'Yes,' she replied, 'I knew Johnnie Behan well. He ate at my place a lot and many's the time when the Clanton-McLowery gang were in town getting roostered, Johnnie stood treat. Sometimes there'd be thirty of them filling my dining room so that the regular customers would have to wait. I guess the Russ House was the only place in town not shot up. Behan looked out of place among those tough characters.

" 'I always figured Johnnie was a twenty-two caliber man in a forty-five-ninety town. He was always bragging and strutting up and down the street, winking at this girl and that. Johnnie made a lot of money and scattered it like a drunken sailor. That always serves to make a man popular with girls on either side of the deadline.

" 'I remember how he bragged and strutted after the Earps left town. "I ran them out," he told everybobdy who would listen. As a matter of fact, the Earps and their freind, Doc Holliday, left town at a slow walk after Johnnie had made a half-hearted attempt to arrest Wyatt and Doc. Wyatt Earp called him and called him plenty, invited him to go for his hardware and shoot out their feud. Earp finally wound up by offering to let the little sheriff chop off any finger on his right hand if he would just attempt to arrest him or Doc.

" 'Johnnie refused. "I ain't got a gun," he said, "and you got two." Doc Holliday butted in. He called the sheriff a blather-skite, a four-flusher and a tin-horn, two-bit gambler.

" 'I wasn't ten feet from them and heard it all,' continued Nellie. 'The sheriff sure ate a lot of crow. The streets on both sides were lined solid when the Earps and Holliday left at a slow walk.

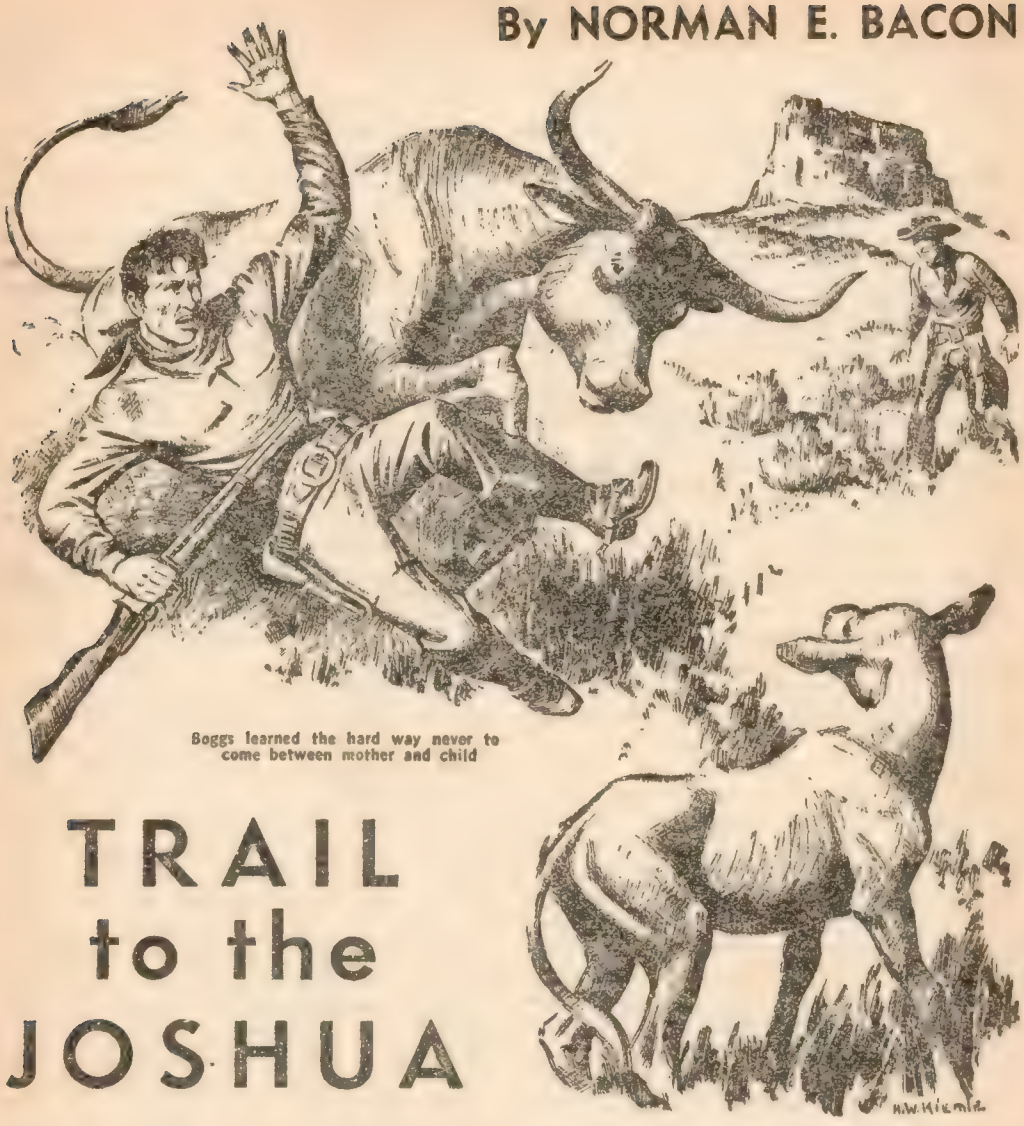
" 'Johnnie Behan didn't show his face until they had been gone four or five hours. Then he gathered together a posse of rustlers, all Curly Bill and John Ringo outlaws, and left town on their heels. One of the posse was a pretty good friend of mine and he told me all about the chase.

" ' "Johnnie sure made a lot of talk," explained the outlaw, "but he was careful not to get within pistol range of the Earps."

" 'After the passing of the Earps, law and order left Tombstone. The outlaws ran wild. Neither life nor property was safe. Day and night you could hear guns popping; stages were held up; passengers robbed; ranchers wiped out, their herds driven off in broad daylight.

" 'Johnnie Behan,' concluded Nellie Cashman, 'was on the wrong side of the fence. His friends were outlaws. He protected them with his office and they backed his hand with their six-shooters.' "

By NORMAN E. BACON



Boggs learned the hard way never to come between mother and child

TRAIL to the JOSHUA

I'M A BRONC buster myself," Slim Hatter said. "Never had much truck with cows."

He hooked a knee over the horn, twisting a quirly with his left hand, pulling the Durham sack closed with his teeth and the fingers of his right hand. He ran his tongue down and around the cigarette, lifting his eyes in a brief, knowing glance at his companion rider.

"Cows," he passed judgment, "they swell. I like a larrupin' good bronc to bust or a cavvy string to comb out of the breaks.

"Always figger cows as an old man's game."

John Sledge's eyes thoughtfully surveyed the plodding mass of cattle before them. He ran a hand over a two day stubble on his square, honest face.

It's Teamwork That Counts When the Going's Rough!

"Well, now, I never thought of it that way," he said. "There's a lot more to drivin' cows than fancy ridin' an' tough talk, as I reckon you'll find out. That is," he added, "if you got sand enough to stick it until we reach Granite Wells."

Slim felt the anger rise in him. "You inferrin' I'm yellow?" he asked, heatedly.

Sledge shrugged. He sat his saddle solidly, his feet square in the stirrups. He was, Slim guessed, forty-five, about one-seventy, and five-ten. A good, dependable hand, but dull, in Slim's estimation.

"I ain't inferrin' anything," he said. "I'm just waitin' to see. When Braddock told me I'd have to take these cattle to Granite Wells I asked him for a couple of good hands. Instead he sends me one harum-scarum bronc peeler and his good wishes. I ain't sayin' nothin', but I ain't hopin' for much, either."

Slim held his anger in check, but he couldn't keep it from showing on his young, careless face.

"What's so tough about drivin' a hundred head of cattle a couple of hundred miles to the railroad?" he asked. "We'll be there in a couple of weeks, even takin' it easy."

John Sledge's face remained stolid, serious.

"Well, for one thing," he said. "There's that dry stretch across Penelope Flats. Cattle get mighty restless when they're hungry an' thirsty. Two, there's the Joshua River to cross, and it might be high this time of year. Three, I heard a rumor Jeff Boggs and his crew is campin' on the yonder side of the Joshua. Could be they'd try a little rustlin'."

Slim shrugged. "I've been dry," he said, "and I've been wet before this. As for Jeff Boggs," he paused and patted the dark handled gun at his side significantly. "I've heard of Boggs, and heard he was a smooth man with a gun. But I reckon Handy Andy here can take care of any hombre that tries a bushwhack."

"A bullet in the back slows a man down a powerful lot," Sledge said, apparently unimpressed. "If'n Boggs is in the country, keep your eyes behind you." His eyes drifted automatically over the herd plodding slowly across the flats. "Wup! There goes that ornery old steer again."

"I'll get him." Slim Hatter, eager for action, roweled his mount gently with his left foot as his right slid back over the horn and down to the stirrup. His Stony horse broke after the old steer and sent him galloping clumsily back into the herd. Slim rejoined Sledge, feeling refreshed by the action.

Driving this trail herd was out of his line, and two days out the monotony was already tiring him. However a man with a weakness for pretty women and good liquor sometimes got himself in spots where he couldn't be choosey about jobs.

"A hundred bucks for two weeks will set me up," he said to Sledge. "I can hit Cheyenne with pocket's jinglin'."

"You keep runnin' 'em the way you did that steer, and you'll run two hundred dollars' worth of fat off this bunch afore we hit the railroad," Sledge told him.

Slim felt the red creep up his neck again. It wasn't the first time Sledge had criticized his driving. Sometimes he felt like Sledge was prodding him on purpose.

"What the heck?" he asked. "They aren't my cattle."

Sledge grunted non-committally.

"We're hitting Penelope Flats tomorrow," he said. "No water for two days. Be a smart idea to save your hoss."

They camped that night by the spring at Jimson Butte. There was grass aplenty and the cattle had a good feed and rest. Slim kept the last watch that night.

"Sure need another hand," Sledge said when he came in. "But I reckon if men had been plentiful, Braddock wouldn't have hired you." Slim had to hold back the hot retort that came to his lips. Sledge just didn't figure him a good hand and that's all there was to it.

There was only one way to change the stubborn Sledge's opinion of him, and that was by action. He thought he had a good start the way he'd gathered up the herd that morning. He had them ready for the trail by the time Sledge had breakfast in the pan. Not, he hastened to add to himself, that he gave a whoop what Sledge thought.

"Still got a hundred head," he announced. "They were mixed up some with some Bar Y stuff, but I got them sorted out. Flip me a couple dozen of those flapjacks and let's get rollin'."

THE sun came up, a round heat-ball in the sky. They had trouble start-

ing the protesting cattle out into the desert.

"Like they knowed what's ahead of them," Sledge said. "Two days hard drive an' no water. But it's the only way to the railroad."

The day wore on. The dust sifted up into the air behind the herd and came down hours later without a trace of breeze disturbing the shape of its cloud. Slim's face felt cooked and the sweat and dust melted together on the withers of his horse and fell off in little chunks.

He pulled his bandanna over his nose and mouth, but it didn't sift the dust much, and was hot besides, so he let it down again, and spit the dirt from his mouth regularly.

It was noon when Sledge spotted the old cow. Slim was riding point when he saw Sledge shove his horse into the middle of the herd. This was so unusual, Slim swung away from the point and met Sledge as he came out of the body of the cattle.

John Sledge's usually unemotional face bore an expression of disgust.

"You picked up an old cow this mornin'," he said.

"Cow?" Slim asked, puzzled. "What's wrong with that? We got lots of cows."

"There's three things wrong," Sledge said, counting them off on his fingers for emphasis. "One, she's a Bar Y critter. Two, she ain't a beef cow, and she ain't fat enough to ship. Three, she's goin' to have a calf—soon."

Slim felt a sinking of the heart.

"I musta traded with the Bar Y in the dark," he said. "I knowed I had a hundred head. What'll we do now?"

"Nothin' we can do now. Just have to take her along until we hit the Joshua and some grass. Can't leave her out here in the desert." Sledge whirled his mount and rode to the rear of the herd.

For a moment Slim stared after him uneasily. His sharp, reckless face bore an expression of impatience.

"Cows!" he muttered to himself. "What the heck, win, lose or draw, we get paid at Granite Wells. What's one cow, more or less?" He rode back to the point. But he determined that from now on he wasn't going to give John Sledge any more opportunities to look at him like he wasn't dry behind the ears.

Their rest that night was short. Slim kept the first watch while Sledge grabbed a couple of hours sleep. The grass was sparse and the cattle were hungry, thirsty and restless. The Bar Y critter kept trying to break out of the circle. Slim was just driving her back for the sixth time when Sledge relieved him.

Sledge said, "Don't like the looks of it." He didn't elaborate on his statement.

Slim said, "Yeah," and hit the blankets for a couple of winks. Whatever it was Sledge didn't like the looks of, apparently it was supposed to be obvious. Anyhow, be darned if he was going to ask any questions.

He found out when daylight broke. Sledge came in to eat the flapjacks Slim had stirred up. He ate silently, ruminatively. He seemed to be turning a problem over in his mind.

"Reckon we'll have to shoot them," he said suddenly.

"Shoot them?" he said. "Who?"

"Why, the old Bar Y cow an' her calf."

"Calf?" Slim said stupidly. You mean she had her calf?"

Sledge stared at him, a little crease of a frown between his eyes. "Why, sure," he said. "You mean you didn't know that last night when she was trying to break away from the herd? A cow likes a little privacy."

Slim said, "Oh," a little crestfallen. "But why shoot her?"

"It's twenty miles to water. That calf couldn't walk one mile, and it's a cinch you couldn't get the old cow to leave it. They'd just both stay here and die. Quicker if we shoot them."

SLIM thought it over. "Okay, it's my fault," he said finally. "I'll waste my lead." He finished his breakfast, sanded out his plate and frying pan, packed them and got his horse.

He mounted and found the Bar Y cow by the outskirts of the herd. She was standing over a small, wet bundle of fur on the ground.

Slim drew his gun. The old cow, a raw-boned brindle, looked up at him and flopped her ears. She seemed to be pretty proud of herself. Slim lined his sights between her ears. She said, "Moo-o-o-o," softly and flopped her ears again.

At her feet, the shapeless bundle strug-

gled and found four wobbly legs which it managed to get under it, and started muzzling for breakfast.

Slim said, "Damn!" The old brindle stood patiently switching flies with her tail, chewing a dry cud. The calf was enjoying his breakfast immensely. Slim said, "Damn," again and knew what he was going to have to do. He said "Might as well get it over with."

He dismounted, took a blanket from his bed roll and wrapped the calf in it. The calf was heavier than it looked and when he was back in the saddle, the brindle pacing excitedly around him, he knew it was going to be a long day.

"Well I'll be shot for a sheepherder!" It was Sledge's voice behind him.

Slim turned belligerently. "What of it?" he asked.

Sledge cut loose a quid of tobacco at an inoffensive cactus plant and turned back to regard Slim with a sardonic humor in his eyes.

"If Boggs could see you now," he said. "I hope, if we do run across that owlhooter, you'll be a dang sight tougher than you look right now." He laughed shortly, and rode away. But somehow his back wasn't as unfriendly as it had been, and he took over the greater labor of the drive that day.

The day ached itself away. The sun came up, loitered overhead, seemingly for hours, and finally started sliding down toward the western horizon. The calf grew heavier.

Finally, toward the shank of the afternoon, when the breaks of the Joshua were already in sight, Slim found that he could tie the calf behind his cantle and let it ride there fairly comfortably.

About four o'clock they met a lone rider coming from the Joshua.

"The river's up," he said. "You'll have to swim for it."

"See anything of Jeff Boggs?" Sledge asked.

"No," the rider, a lean, wind-bitten cowpoke answered. "But he's been nibblin' at the ranchers between here and Granite Wells pretty reg'lar, and they're gettin' riled. I reckon if they had the nerve to go after him, there'd be a hanging on the Joshua."

"I figger we can handle his kind," Slim Hatter said. He pulled his .45 and whirled it in the air.

The lean cowpoke looked at him, looked at the calf tied behind his saddle and at the old Bar Y cow trailing along behind him. A faint suggestion of a smile touched his lips.

"I'll bet you could, too," he said, and was gone in a smother of dust.

DAWN found Slim and John Sledge in the saddle, the turgid mass of the Joshua river looming black and formidable before them. The cattle were banked against the water, bawling and nervous as if they were afraid of what was to come.

A steer broke away from the herd and Slim sent his horse in sudden pursuit. Stony was sweating already, though the morning was cool, and the dew still fresh on the grass.

Slim swung the steer back into the herd, and was joined for a minute by Sledge.

"Are you ready?" Sledge asked.

Slim mopped sweat from his forehead with a dusty bandanna.

"Ready as I'll ever be," he said. "What're we waiting for?"

Sledge nodded.

"Let'm go," he ordered. "Keep shovin' 'em. Round them on the tail. It's going to be rough. The river's higher than I've ever seen it."

His neck reined his horse to the left, upstream, pounding along the flanks of the herd, whooping and waving his hat. Slim raised all the racket he could on his half of the herd.

The mass of the cattle surged toward the river. Those in front felt the cold rise of water about their legs and drew back, tossing their heads and bawling in protest. Those in the rear, frightened, shoved them ahead into the stream.

For a moment it looked like it was going to be easy. Then the leaders, almost swimming now, broke away to the right and left and circled back toward the bank. Slim shoved his horse into the water to head them. On his side, Sledge was doing the same. This relieved the pressure on the rear of the herd, and the cattle backed away from the water.

Slim pulled his horse out of the water and back to the rear of the herd, exerting the pressure again.

"Never make it!" Sledge came pound-

ing up on his big sorrel. "If I'd knowed the river was this bad, I'd sure told Braddock we had to have some more good hands on this drive!"

Slim looked at him, angry dancing lights flickering in his eyes.

"You ain't quittin', are you, Sledge?" he asked. The sweat was hot on his face, and he could feel the heavy breathing of his horse against his knees.

Sledge said, "Maybe you can come up with somethin', bronc peeler." He was angry, too, and it showed in his voice. Slim knew it was wrath at the cattle and at his own failure to get them into the water. Nevertheless, his tone fanned Slim's own temper.

"Sit tight, farmer," he said curtly. "I'm goin' to try somethin'. Keep those cattle buttoned up."

He rode up river a short distance, and was back in a minute, the old brindle's calf tucked under his arm, the brindle herself lumbering at the heels of his horse.

Hopefully he headed Stony straight out into the river. Looking back, he saw the old cow plunging after him and he grinned. Then the calf felt the first cold touch of the water, and it let out a frightened bleat and struggled in Slim's arms, almost unhorsing him into the river. But the old cow said, "Moo!" anxiously, and started swimming.

Slim laughed triumphantly, then the calf cut loose with all four legs and they all went under momentarily. Then Stony, legs working like pistons, came up again, and Slim, laughing and cursing, spit muddy water from his mouth and felt Stony's hoofs touch the bottom of the far shore.

Behind him, Slim could hear Sledge getting the idea, whooping it up at the rear of the herd. Looking back, he saw that Sledge was everywhere at once, and he felt admiration for the superb way Sledge rode his horse, for the manner in which he seemed to know where cows were going to break out next.

"Why, the darn fool," he said grudgingly to the calf, "I never figgered the old clodhopper had that much life in him."

THE PRESSURE on the lead cattle became unbearable. A few of them started swimming. Most of them circled, but a couple of steers took after Slim and the old brindle. Behind them three or four more headed across the river.

The current was swift, the water cold, but luckily they didn't have to swim far before their feet touched bottom again. Slim deposited the calf on the far shore as the brindle came charging up.

"Pore old lady," Slim said. "Your motherly love is shore takin' a beatin' this day."

He crossed back to help Sledge. The line had to be kept moving. Once it was broken, they would have the whole thing to do over again.

They were pushing the last few head across and the feet of their horses had just touched bottom, when the rifle shot came from the hill ahead.

Sledge was riding beside Slim Hatter. He was grinning and Slim was laughing back at him, the tension between them forgotten in the triumph of the crossing, when suddenly the grin was wiped off Sledge's face. It was replaced by a look of numbed surprise, and his hand went automatically to the hole that suddenly had appeared in his shirt.

He said: "Boggs!" in stupid amazement, and fell over against Slim.

Water spouted to Slim's right, and he heard the nasty spat of the lead as it hit the surface of the river.

Stony shook his head in annoyance. Slim had to hold him in with his right hand, and the weight of Sledge was heavy on his left side. He didn't have a chance to draw his gun.

He cursed, debating whether to turn Stony and beat a retreat across the river or to go ahead, when three men appeared from the brush on the far side of the river.

All three had guns in their hands, and the leader was carrying a rifle.

"Come on in!" he bellowed across the water. "And keep your hands clear of your guns." He stood spraddle-legged on the river bank, and didn't offer to help Slim with Sledge. Slim lowered the wounded man to the sand and faced the big bushwhacker.

"You're Jeff Boggs, aren't you?" he asked.

Boggs grinned evilly. "The same," he said. He was a big man, broad of shoulder, the shirt on his chest stretched tight, his waist lean and firm. He had a black

stubble of beard on a face that was cruel and sensuous, and his brittle little eyes bored straight into Slim's. "You boys sure walked right into this one, didn't you?"

He walked over to where Sledge lay groaning on the ground. He nudged the wounded man over with the toe of his boot, stooped and lifted Sledge's gun.

"Got him too high," he grunted. "Afraid he'll live."

His gun came up suddenly to cover Slim who had made a threatening step toward him.

"Take it easy cowboy, and we'll let you live, too—maybe."

Slim felt his gun eased from its holster as one of Boggs' two men came up behind him.

Boggs was in high good humor. "Get those cattle left in the river, boys," he said to his two companions, a tough looking pair of owlhooters. "Can't afford to lose any, can we? Not after these fellers was so good as to drive them over for us."

Slim said, "You'll rot for this, Boggs."

IGNORING the threat of Boggs' gun, he knelt beside Sledge. The cowman had struggled to a sitting position. His wound was high, and while painful, it didn't look fatal.

"Just a scratch," Sledge said, the muscles on his jaws standing out as he clenched his teeth.

Slim stopped the bleeding the best he could, tearing up his shirt for bandaging. Meanwhile, he kept a wary eye on Boggs, hoping for a break of some sort.

"I'll get you, Boggs," he said. "If it takes me twenty years."

Boggs laughed. His laugh was a deep rumble, and it wasn't pleasant to listen to. His two men came past on their mounts and headed into the river.

Something else was watching Boggs, too. The old brindle's calf, wet, cold and hungry, was wobbling around on a pair of match-stick legs.

A few feet away its mother was sampling the bunch grass.

Slim saw the calf with half his mind, saw it suddenly eye Boggs and head toward him. The calf was no doubt hunting for a mid-morning snack. It butted Boggs energetically from behind.

Boggs turned, cursing, and kicked the calf roughly. The calf bleated. The old brindle's head came up. She started lumbering toward her calf. Boggs stood in her path and she rolled him aside before he even saw her. Boggs went to the ground, arms and legs flailing, and the brindle passed over him and beyond him to her calf.

Slim dove for Boggs.

Boggs snarled, "No you don't!" He had dropped his rifle and his hands went toward his .45's. Slim reached him and smashed his fist into Boggs' face. Blood spurted. Boggs went backward from a crouching position and fell flat on his back. His guns were coming up.

Slim drove forward on him, and his knee, with the weight of his body behind it, found the pit of Boggs' stomach. All the fight went out of the rustler.

Slim grabbed up the rifle. He swung the butt and Boggs went to sleep proper.

Boggs' men in the river were shooting and yelling. Slim dove behind a rock and let Boggs' .30-.30 do his talking for him. The boys in the river, hopelessly exposed, changed their minds in a hurry.

Half an hour later, with Sledge covering them, Slim had them thoroughly trussed and staked, with Boggs, to a husky mahogany bush where they would keep a day or so until he could send the sheriff after them.

Then he rounded up the cattle and stashed them away in a grassy spot on the river bank, and loaded Sledge onto his sorrel.

"The cows will keep a few days until I get to a doctor," he said.

"I guess I owe you an apology," Sledge said. "With a little practice you'd make a first rate cowhand."

Slim grinned. "It ain' so tough," he said, watching the calf cutting stiff-legged didoes around its complacent mother. "It ain't so tough when the cows cooperate."

●

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

at the hard work, they were still finding lots of the blue-black ore, throwing it away and cursing this metal which clogged the riffles of their rockers. Then in 1859, ten years after the start of the California gold rush, a California rancher, happening to visit the new workings which were further up the slope of the mountain, carried away a sample of the blue-black ore which was causing the miners so much grief. In Grass Valley, a leading gold camp on the west slope of the Sierras, he presented it to Judge James Walsh, a leading citizen, who had it assayed. The assay revealed a value of several thousand dollars per ton in silver.

No news spreads with more rapidity than the report of a new strike in a mining community. No group of men act more promptly and unanimously than miners upon such information. Hundreds of men, afoot or on muleback, swarmed across the Sierras, rounded Lake Tahoe, descended into the Carson Valley, and ascended Gold Canyon to Gold Hill and Virginia City.

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Terrors of the Trail

Most of the invaders from San Francisco and near the coast were blocked at Placer-

[*Turn page*]

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ville. A few struggled on to snow-bound stations higher in the mountains. Perhaps a few dozen reached Virginia City. A few who had almost made it over the mountains were driven back by the cold and privation, reaching the Sacramento Valley, with frozen hands or feet and cases of pneumonia to warn the waiting throngs of the terrors of the mountain passes.

It is said that two men on foot met at a point in the mountains, one going across to Virginia City, the other on his way back to the Sacramento Valley. The one headed for Virginia City told the other that he had best turn back, that no human being could go through the stretch of mountain snow that he had traversed and live. But the man on his way back to a warmer section declined to turn around and make another try for the big mining district. Whereupon the man who had given the advice about the way back to the Valley trudged on toward the big new strike, but had gone only a little way when a great avalanche of snow descended upon him snuffing out his life, his body not being recovered until after the great avalanche of snow had melted.

A few starved and frozen residents of Virginia City, who had not the means to cope with the situation and had returned to California during the winter, carried the news that flour was selling at seventy-five cents a pound, and all food at similar prices. Blankets were almost beyond price, and a tent was worth the usual price of a modern bungalow. Moved by such opportunities for profit, daring traders packed mules with food, whisky and blankets, and invaded the Sierra passes before the end of February. The mules sank to their bellies in the drifts. The blankets were unloaded and spread upon the snow to give a safer footing. Still the attempt failed.

Men and Mules

Not until March did a trader reach Virginia City with his pack-train. There he erected a tent, sold two hundred dollars' worth of drinks before nightfall, and rented blankets and space to roll them on the floor to forty men at a dollar each. Close upon his heels came others, until the frozen passes of the high mountains swarmed with men and mules.

So thick was the traffic that travelers were never out of sight of other travelers, and

never out of sight of the tragic evidences of disaster which had overtaken other adventurers. Ruins of abandoned freight wagons, carcasses of mules, broken wheelbarrows, picks, shovels, looted packs littered the way.

Probably with only a view to profit, and not for the sake of benefiting travelers alone, many places were set up along the route, perhaps a wayside tavern built of wagon bottoms, packing cases and burlap to welcome travelers, who had money, with whisky and meals consisting of beans, bacon and potatoes.

Strawberry Hotel, in what is still known as Strawberry Flat, high in the Sierras, was the most pretentious of the stopping-places. It was a large log house with a main room containing an immense fireplace. Huge logs blazed on the hearth, throwing out heat that must have been welcome to the half-frozen travelers. When the dining room opened the crowd rushed the doors and filled the benches around the rough board tables. A tin plate filled with beans, potatoes and bread was thrust before each. A tin cup filled with scalding black coffee, sweetened with molasses, supplemented the fare. Each hungry wayfarer wiped up his plate with the last scrap of his bread and it was ready for the next customer. The diners were herded out like cattle into the main room, and the rush was repeated. By the time the last of the travelers were fed, three hundred men lay rolled in their blankets on the floor of the main room, packed together like logs in a raft.

No Weaklings Survived

That trip over the Sierras, either way, that winter was a bitter test of men and animals.

[*Turn page*]

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No weaklings survived. It was a hard trip to Virginia City, and a fellow had to be wary to live after he reached it, as like all other mining camps and mining boomtowns, it was tough. The lawless element was ever present, and gunplay practically a daily routine. Few seemed to care whether there was a murder a day or a murder a week; all were too busy trying to make a fortune to be bothered by anyone's trouble other than their own.

Usually when there was a killing, the coroner's jury would meet and would render a verdict that the deceased came to his death by the hands of a party or parties unknown to the jury, and if the deceased was not a man of prominence this closed the case. The criminal courts were little interested in tracing the killer of any ordinary person. They probably reasoned with themselves that this could not bring back a departed life, but would take a certain amount of their time which might be better used in trying to make a fortune.

Murder of a Woman

The lawless element grew bolder until finally a woman, Julia Bulette, was robbed and murdered. A Frenchman known as John Millain was arrested and charged with the crime, and this brought about a peculiar situation. Wives of the town were jealous of Julia on account of the attention they thought had been paid to her by their husbands, and all the time that Millain languished in jail he was visited by scores and scores of women who brought all manner of dainty cakes, cookies, fruit and flowers to the prisoner.

This attitude of the women of the city, however, did not keep the prisoner from being convicted and condemned to be hanged. On the day of his execution the entire city turned out. Balconies all along the line of march from the jail to the gallows a mile north of town were crowded. The sidewalks were jammed. A uniformed company of sixty of the National Guard, surrounding the closed carriage in which the prisoner rode with two priests, had difficulty in pressing back the throngs to make room for the cortege. The crowds lined the roads far beyond the city limits, and other crowds swarmed upon the hillsides which afforded a view of the gallows. Hundreds had brought their lunches, and peddlers did a thriving business in peanuts, popcorn and red lemon-

ade. Virginia City, always responsive to the spectacular, was making almost a gay carnival of an execution.

Millain mounted the gallows with a firm easy step, kneeled for the blessing of the priests, denied his guilt in a ringing voice, thanked the women who had brought delicacies to his cell, dropped, died and dangled at the end of his rope.

Virginia City trudged homeward, strewing the shells of peanuts and hard boiled eggs, the bones of fried chicken lunches, and scraps of food for half a mile over the hillside. It was truly a Roman holiday!

The "601" Vigilantes

This spectacular execution, however, aroused the interest of the more law-abiding men of the city and there was an organization of vigilantes. The organization was known as the "601." This was just about the time, or soon after, a man by the name of Arthur Heffernan had killed a man in the barroom of one of the most respectable hotels. The prisoner was taken from the jail at midnight, and very quietly escorted to the outskirts of the city. Half an hour later a cannon boomed from an abandoned fort on the outskirts of the city, and at daybreak the body of the murderer was found hanging from the old hoisting frame over an abandoned shaft. Upon it was a card bearing the numerals "601."

The coroner's jury labeled this one as usual. They found that Arthur Hefferman, or Perkins, as he was commonly known, came to his death at the hands of a party or parties unknown to the jury.

Time and time again, that cannon boomed in the dead hours of night, and always there would be a body hanging and bearing the numerals "601." The Vigilantes began giving certain known criminals a little card or slip ordering them to leave the city and never come back. One character, George B. Kirk,

[*Turn page*]

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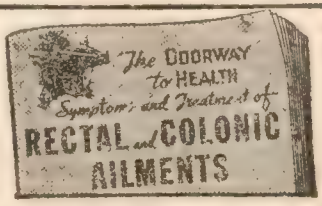

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had received a "ticket of leave" ordering him to leave the city and stay away, and he left—but came back only to play the leading role, following the boom of the cannon, as another lifeless body swinging at the end of a rope and bearing the dreaded "601" numerals.

The dread of the Vigilantes by the criminal element did more than anything else to bring law and order to Virginia City, and the city lived on, lived high and always spectacularly, through the heyday of the greatest silver mining operations ever known in the world. That's the end of the trail this time, waddies, but drop around again and we will ride other exciting trails of the old West. *Adios.*

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OUR NEXT ISSUE

WHEN Wayne Morgan—or the Masked Rider—heard the cry of the catamount he always paid heed, for that was the signal he and his Yaqui friend Blue Hawk often used to get in touch with each other without rousing the suspicion of enemies. They worked together like a team of high-strung carriage horses, instantly responsive to each others' battle tactics.

In the next MASKED RIDER novel, TRIGGERS ON THE YELLOWWATER, by T. W. Ford, they have full need of the best of such team work, and their prearranged lion call pays off. When Morgan rides out of the sandhills into the town of Creek City, and a bushwhacking band of bloodless badmen, it is lucky for him that the bushwhackers don't know that Blue Hawk is around or the story would end on page two with our friend the Masked Rider cloaked forever in the cold pall of death.

When Wayne Morgan entered Creek City on the edge of the Yellowwater, the biggest town at that time in Saguaro County, he had no intention of doing anything but riding peacefully through, but the swift swirling of events caught him up like a leaf in a whirlwind, held fast by his high moral code.

For in the sudden gun-trouble that caught him unwittingly in its midst chance laid him under the debt of death—and to a wrong-gone boy who, in an attempt to atone in one last heroic act for a moment's madness, gave his life to save his would-be rescuer, and

left the Masked Rider under bond to a riddled corpse.

Vengeance was something that Wayne Morgan had long outgrown, justice was a concept that he espoused, but would have had a hard time defining, but when a cold-blooded, crook-souled, power-mad, money-loving murderer turned a young boy down the road to death of heart and body—then killed him to close his mouth and left his widowed mother to face life alone—Wayne Morgan knew he could not go on till he had destroyed that man and drawn out the entire infection of scabrous badmen that was poisoning the blood stream of Saguaro County, and of which that man was the core.

Bold as a belled bull in a blackberry patch, the man had worn a white sombrero, white vest and red shirt, and Wayne Morgan soon had him tagged as one Brock, a newcomer in town. From a dance hall girl named Anne, Wayne learned that Brock had been a bad one south toward the Border, though no one else except herself, and possibly Sheriff Benzinger knew of it. This Brock was a tough one with "a heavy-boned jaw, slab-cheeked face and little buttons of fiercely bright eyes. His face was vicious. Yet it had a certain dead calmness, the calmness of a mask behind which there are no emotions."

Brock's entry into town was curiously related in time to an outbreak of unexplained killings and robberies that started with the shooting in Ebban's General Store of Jim Sands and climaxed after three robberies by the fight at Toby Hazen's ranch in which Hazen was killed by repeated knife strokes in the back. The only known motive for it, and that obviously insufficient, was the fact that Hazen had won a few dollars at poker that night. It was as a grisly concommitant of the fight at Hazen's that young Benny Coombs lost his life, and Wayne Morgan became embroiled in the affairs of Saguaro County.

This job takes not only all of Morgan's great courage, daring and wonderful gun-speed, but taxes his powers as a puzzle-cracker. Many a top-notch Eastern detective would envy the iron-minded methods Wayne Morgan brings to the solution of this baffling cowtown mystery—a mystery that becomes still further complicated when Tag Morfee, one of the Border country's most deadly gunmen, apparently a friend of the

[*Turn page*]

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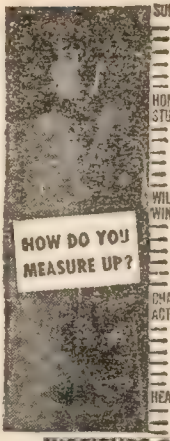

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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946, of Masked Rider Western, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1949. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Masked Rider Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York. N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. Herbert, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1949. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1950.

dance hall girl, Anne, and now supposedly reformed, appears in the picture with an offer to clean up Creek City for $500—a low valuation to put on the hides of the assorted sidewinders that are building up a reign of horror in the sun-sleepy village.

Wayne Morgan finds himself confronted with a hatful of seemingly unanswerable questions: What happened to the red-shirted killer with the white calfskin vest? Who murdered Jimmy Sands—and why? Who knifed Toby Hazen to death? Why? Who is the slim puncher who left a spur in the murder corral at Hazen's? Why does the dance hall girl Anne become rigid with fear at questions regarding certain aspects of the case? Why is Sheriff Benzinger conveniently absent during the worst of these upheavals? Is it true that he knew Brock on the Border? What is the gun-slinger Tag Morfee's interest in all this? Why should he come out of retirement and risk his life for $500? Has he some deeper motive?

Hombres and hombresses, friends and fellow puzzle-busters! Here's a blood-pumping mystery of the range that has even the Masked Rider racking his brains and pacing the desert floor, but with his genius for fightin' and fixin' and with the redoubtable Blue Hawk, and the wonder horse Midnight in reserve, we have no doubt that he will settle the hash and bad habits of this villainous crew in his usual indomitable fashion. Join us next number in one of the most exciting adventures the Masked Rider has ever been through, T. W. Ford's TRIGGERS ON THE YELLOWWATER — and for good measure a batch of rattling good short stories, true stories and Trail Talk. Look forward to a feast of reading pleasure.

LETTERS FROM READERS

NOW we come to the corner where the readers express themselves. It's always a great pleasure to read your communications and we wish we could print them all. Remember to send all your letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And now let's start the letter ball rolling!

To my way of thinking THE MASKED RIDER WESTERN is one of the best Western story magazines out. I've read quite a few of them, but so far the Masked Rider stories always seem

the best, unless I run across some stories by Jim Mayo or a couple of other favorites. Then they all rate together.

I believe a few others as well as myself would like to read about the origin of The Masked Rider, and why he decided to become known as The Masked Rider as well as how he met his partner, Blue Hawk and how he acquired his horse, Midnight. Thank you very much.—*Napoleon B. Evans, 750 Van Buren St., Laurel, Mississippi.*

That is a very interesting question, and one that we have pondered much about ourselves. The fact of the matter is that many facts about the origin of the Masked Rider are shrouded in mystery, and we know only as much about him as you will find explained in the stories themselves.

We do know that for a man to forego home and family and devote himself to a life of hardship and warfare entirely in the interests of others, there must have been some soul-wrenching experience in his early life. From the way he operates, we assume that he must have been a Westerner from way back, probably raised on a cattle ranch. For he can take a job as a bronc buster, and hold his own at any kind of range work as has been proved over and over again.

We know that he has worked as miner and even as a store clerk and card dealer, so he is not unfamiliar with the more sophisticated side of life. And from the way he handles a gun and manhandles men when necessary we strongly suspect that at some time or other he must have been a member of some law-enforcing body such as the Texas Rangers.

Whatever his past we hope that this romantic, fearless, black-caped nemesis of all oppressors of the weak, this whole-souled fighter for all that is clean and wholesome and progressive, will ride with us into the far distant trails of the future!

In reading the October number of MASKED RIDER WESTERN—which next to the TEXAS RANGERS, I think is the best Western Magazine on the market—about the great and near great men that have lived, at one time or another in their lives, in New Mexico, I find you didn't have

[*Turn page*]

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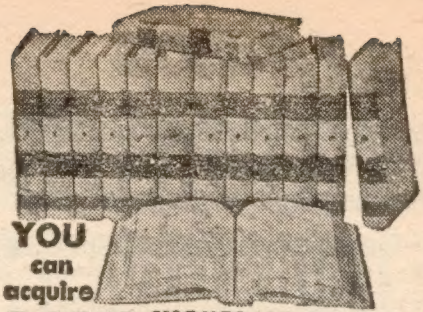

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space to name one whom I and many others count a great man. Although he doesn't really class as a Westerner, he did live in New Mexico—none other than Ernie Pyle.

I have talked to hundreds, and in asking who they think the greatest men are, these are the answers I got—six to one:

Roosevelt—to him all men looked alike before God.

Pyle—because of being so close to the boys over there and just a great guy all around.

Babe Ruth—good sportsmanship. A great baseball player.

All real men at heart.—*Miss Ann Lawson, 2320 McCrosky Ave., Knoxville, Tenn.*

Thanks, Miss Lawson, for your kind words and your interesting letter. Yes there are, we agree, a few men in each generation who touch the heartstrings of ordinary mortals because, whatever their faults, there is a true thread of sincerity at the bottom of their lives, and certainly the three you mention are among them.

My family and I have been reading this magazine for years and like it best of them all. I have been reading THE MASKED RIDER ever since I read THE AVENGING SHADOW fifteen years or so ago. He has been in lots and lots of good stories since, but I still think it was the best. Well, we'll be expectng to see this letter in print in your magazine soon.—*Mrs. D. J. Brown and family, Pensacola, Florida.*

You can bet your Sunday saddle we'll print a letter by a lady who's been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for fifteen years. Well, Mrs. Brown, you set us a challenge — and that is to print a story you will like better than THE AVENGING SHADOW. We'll sure bust a latigo trying.

I sure like those Western stories, and I like Wayne Morgan and also his pal Blue Hawk. You'll never know how much those magazines can mean to one as lonely as I am. Magazines and cigarettes are my sole companions, so please keep printing those stories of the good old days. Keep Wayne Morgan and his pal Blue Hawk busy, and as long as I can see, I'll be reading them. Always looking for the next issue of your magazine.—*Dora Schanke, RFD 1, Peebles, Ohio.*

A letter like that makes us feel good. We wonder how may lonesome lives such magazines as ours bring some pleasure to—and hope it is many. And we hope many, many more of you will write to us, and let us know what you think about MASKED RIDER WESTERN or send us anything of interest you have to say to your fellow readers about the West or any other subject. If you haven't time for a letter a postcard does the trick. *Hasta luego.* — THE EDITOR.

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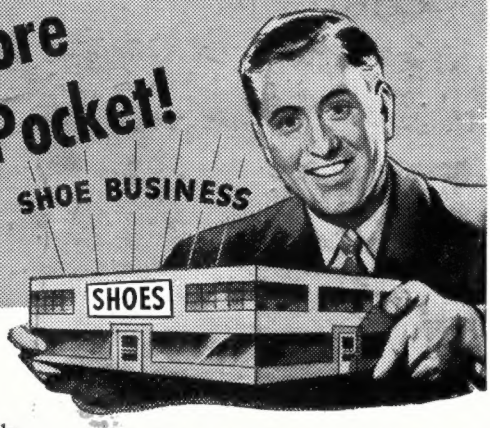

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